PROFESSIONALLY RELATED ABSENCES:

Incidence, Causes & Key Findings for School Districts

Table of Contents

This report was developed in close collaboration with the
Center for Research and Reform in Education at Johns Hopkins University.

Executive Summary

This report focuses on the incidence and potential impacts of professionally related absences of educational employees in districts and other K-12 organizations across the United States.

Unlike personal absences (illness, bereavement, etc.), professionally related absences are related to an employee's regular responsibilities, and the absence reasons and dates are directed or approved by district- or school-level leaders.

Objectives

This report analyzes data from 4,535 K-12 organizations using the Aesop employee absence and substitute management system. It also reviews results from a national survey completed by school district staff in 690 school districts.

The report addresses the following objectives:

- *Increase awareness regarding the number of absences that are professionally related*

- *Provide data regarding actual trends in professionally related absences*

- *Analyze the degree of common understanding between Human Resources and Curriculum and Instruction personnel regarding the incidence and impact of professionally related absences*

- *Suggest strategies for reducing these professionally related absences*

Summary of Findings

The data indicate that approximately one-fifth of all absences are professionally related, with approximately half of these absences related directly to professional development. Employees who are absent and require a substitute to cover their absences are more than twice as likely to be out for professionally related reasons.

While the average number of professionally related absences has declined slightly over three years, the average number of absences for professional development specifically has remained relatively stable.

Despite this, the ability to fill absences with substitutes has steadily declined across all absence categories over the last three years.

Further exacerbating this issue, approximately one-third of all professionally related absences requiring a substitute are reported within four days of the absence date, which is surprising given that these types of absences are typically planned weeks in advance. The data show a decline in the ability to fill absences as the lead time shortens.

Based upon the survey of nearly 700 district staff, perceptions of professionally related absence numbers are relatively close to actual numbers. However, there is a difference in perspective when disaggregated by administrative role, with Superintendents and Curriculum and Instruction personnel perceiving these absences to be less frequent than Human Resources personnel.

Similarly, the data show that nearly half of Human Resources personnel think professionally related absences should be decreased, while almost three-quarters of Curriculum and Instruction personnel think current levels should be maintained or increased.

The collaboration between these departments around professionally related absences is another source of discrepancy, with Superintendents and Curriculum and Instruction personnel perceiving greater collaboration with Human Resources personnel than is perceived by those in Human Resources.

The report concludes with strategies for increasing collaboration between these departments in an effort to reduce professionally related absences and increase fill rates to ultimately reduce costs and – most importantly – increase employee effectiveness and instructional time.

Definitions:

Professionally related absences are absences related to an employee's regular responsibilities that are directed or approved by the organization (district) or school. Unlike personal absences (illness, bereavement, etc.), the individual's reasons and dates for being absent are directly controlled or approved by organization- or school-level leaders.

> *What they include: professional development, field trips, association/bargaining unit work, school business*
>
> *What they do not include: illness, vacation, personal time off, bereavement, jury duty, military leave, unexcused absences, workers' compensation.*

Employees requiring a sub: Includes only absences for individuals in positions where a substitute is required, whether teachers or other employee types, such as bus drivers. Each absence day counts once regardless of duration. For instance, a two-hour absence counts the same as a full-day absence.

Employees not requiring a sub: Includes only absences for individuals in positions where a substitute is not required. Each absence day counts once regardless of duration. For instance, a two-hour absence counts the same as a full-day absence.

Three-year period: The data included in this report represent a three-year period based upon a standard school year cycle, from July 1, 2012, through June 30, 2015.

Employee Absence Incidence and Causes

All Absence Reasons

Figure 1 shows a breakdown of all absences by reason for a three-year period. This data was collected from Aesop, an employee absence and substitute management system, and represents more than 4,500 K-12 organizations across the nation.

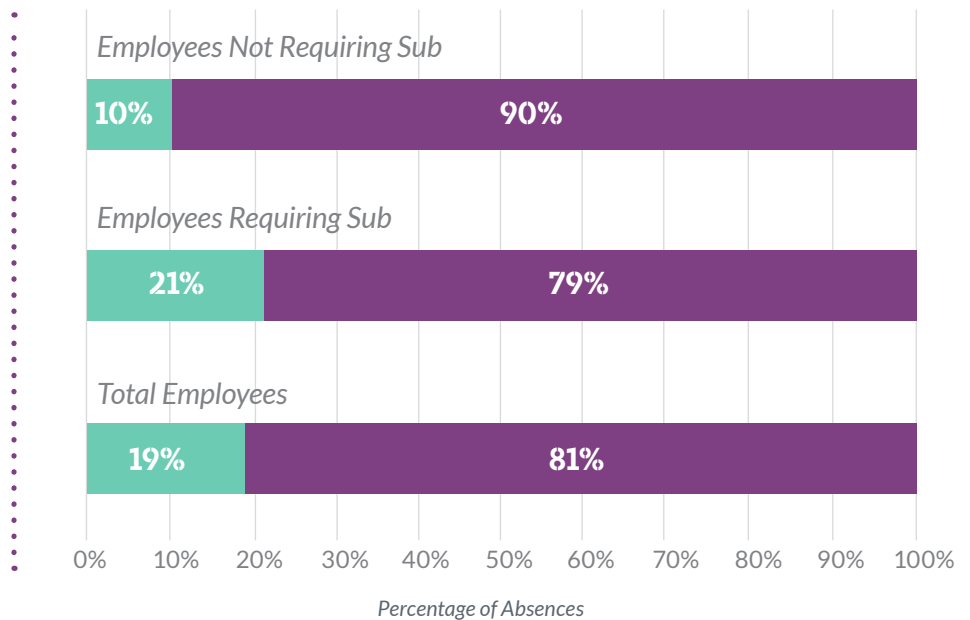| Absence Reasons	Total	Employees Requiring Sub	Employees Not Requiring Sub
Illness	48%	49%	41%
Personal Time Off	17%	18%	16%
Professional Development	10%	11%	6%
School Business	8%	9%	4%
Vacation	6%	2%	21%
Other	6%	6%	6%
Bereavement	2%	2%	2%
Field Trip	1%	1%	0%
Unexcused Absence	1%	1%	1%
Workers' Compensation	1%	1%	2%
Jury Duty	0%	1%	0%

Figure 1
Absence Reasons Over a Three-Year Period

Note: Not included in this figure are absences reasons accounting for less than 1% of absences each — including Military Leave and Association/ Bargaining Unit meetings.

Absence Reasons by Professionally Related vs. Personal

Absence reasons can be further examined by grouping according to professionally related vs. personal absences. As seen in Figure 2, professionally related absences account for roughly one-fifth (19%) of the total absences and absences for employees requiring a substitute (21%). Personal absences account for the remainder (81% and 79%, respectively). Professionally related absences are lower for employees not requiring a substitute (10%).

Figure 2
Professionally Related vs. Personal Absences

Employees Not Requiring Sub

| 10% | 90% |

Employees Requiring Sub

| 21% | 79% |

Total Employees

| 19% | 81% |

0% 10% 20% 30% 40% 50% 60% 70% 80% 90% 100%

Percentage of Absences

Professionally Related Absences ▊   *Personal Absences* ▊

16,674,052
Total professionally related absences over a three-year period

70,647,954
Total personal absences over a three-year period

Looking at just professionally related absences, Figure 3 shows:

- School district employees have an average of **2.99** professionally related absences each year.

- An average of **3.23** professionally related absences per year require a substitute.

- An average of **1.83** professionally related absences per year do not require a substitute.

School Year	Employees Requiring Sub	Employees Not Requiring Sub	Total
2012-13	**3.31**	**1.88**	**3.06**
2013-14	**3.24**	**1.88**	**3.01**
2014-15	**3.17**	**1.75**	**2.93**
Total	**3.23**	**1.83**	**2.99**

Figure 3
Average Number of Professionally Related Absences per Employee
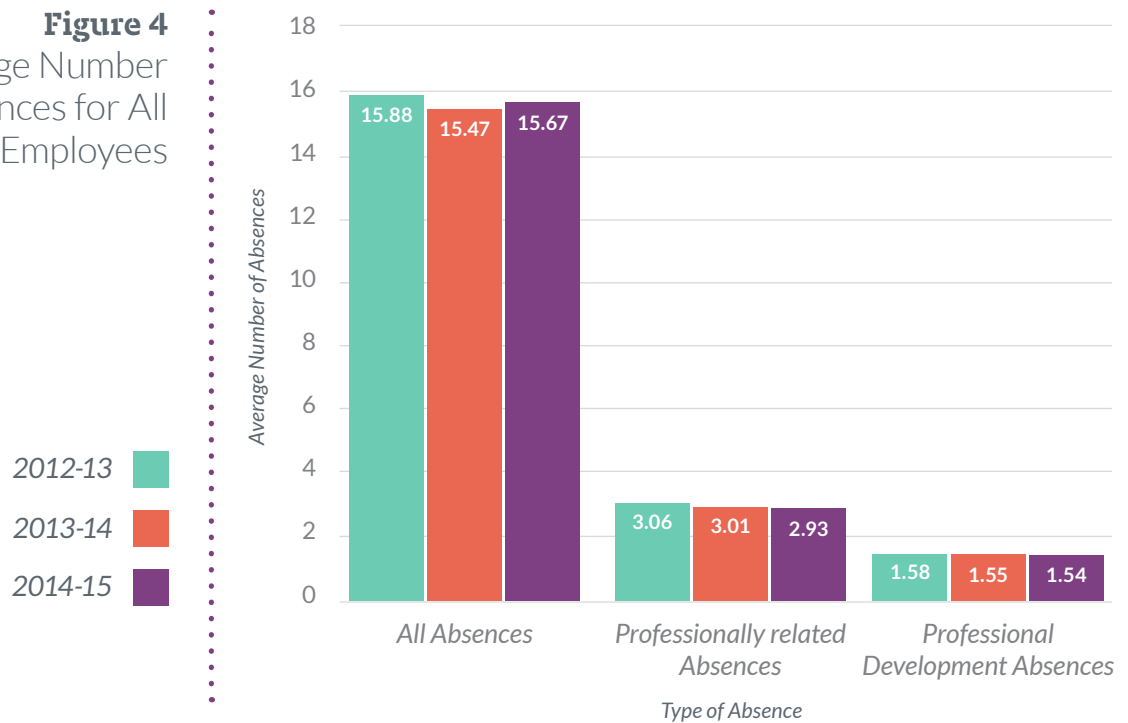
KEY FINDINGS

- *Illness and personal time together account for approximately two-thirds of all absences. Illness alone accounts for nearly half of all absences.*

- *Approximately one-fifth of all absences are professionally related, with more than half of these absences related directly to professional development.*

- *Employees who are absent and require a substitute to cover their absences are nearly twice as likely to be out for professionally related reasons than those who do not require a substitute.*

Trends in Employee Absences

Three-year trend data presented in Figure 4 suggest that professionally related absences are decreasing. The rate of the decline, however, is noticeably smaller for absences associated with professional development than with other reasons.

Figure 4
Average Number of Absences for All Employees

2012-13
2013-14
2014-15

Average Number of Absences

	All Absences	Professionally related Absences	Professional Development Absences
2012-13	15.88	3.06	1.58
2013-14	15.47	3.01	1.55
2014-15	15.67	2.93	1.54

Type of Absence

Absences for Professional Development

Exploring the data further, Figure 5 shows the breakdown of the average number of days per year employees are absent for professional development, broken out by those not requiring a substitute versus those requiring a substitute.

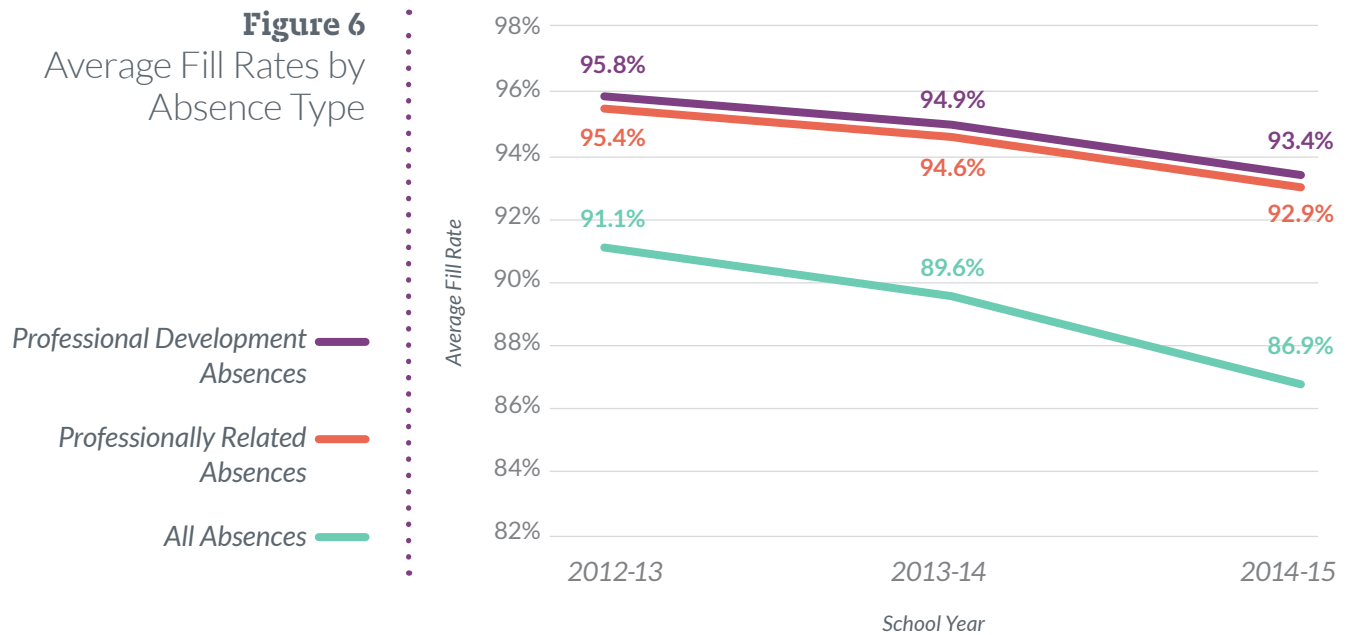| School Year	Employees Not Requiring Sub	Employees Requiring Sub	Total
2012-13	1.06	1.69	1.58
2013-14	1.03	1.66	1.55
2014-15	1.02	1.64	1.54

Figure 5
Average Number of Employee Absences per Year for Professional Development

KEY FINDINGS

- *Professionally related absences (which include those for professional development, school business and more) are decreasing, while absences due specifically to professional development have remained relatively steady at close to an average of 1.55 days a year.*

- *More of these absences for professional development require substitutes than not, with similar, small decreases in average absence numbers in both categories.*

Substitute Fill Rates by Absence Type

Despite the relatively steady rate of absences from 2012-13 to 2014-15 for professional development absences, finding a substitute (i.e., the fill rate) for professional development absences has become more difficult, as it has for all absence types (Figure 6):

Figure 6
Average Fill Rates by Absence Type

Professional Development Absences —

Professionally Related Absences —

All Absences —

Average Fill Rate

98%
96% 95.8%   94.9%   93.4%
94% 95.4%   94.6%   92.9%
92% 91.1%
90%   89.6%
88%   86.9%
86%
84%
82%
     2012-13   2013-14   2014-15

School Year

KEY FINDINGS

- *Success at filling absences with substitutes has declined over the last three years for all absence categories.*

Absence Lead Time & Fill Rates

As shown in Figure 7, the majority (53%) of professionally related absences requiring a substitute are reported less than 10 days before occurrence, and 32% are reported within four days of the absence. Yet, absences that are directed or approved by the district are typically planned well in advance of such reports.

The 46% of absences reported with 10 or more days of lead time provide greater opportunity for departments to locate and schedule substitutes or make other suitable arrangements for covering work, lessening the burden that often falls on the principal to plan for and fill last-minute absences.
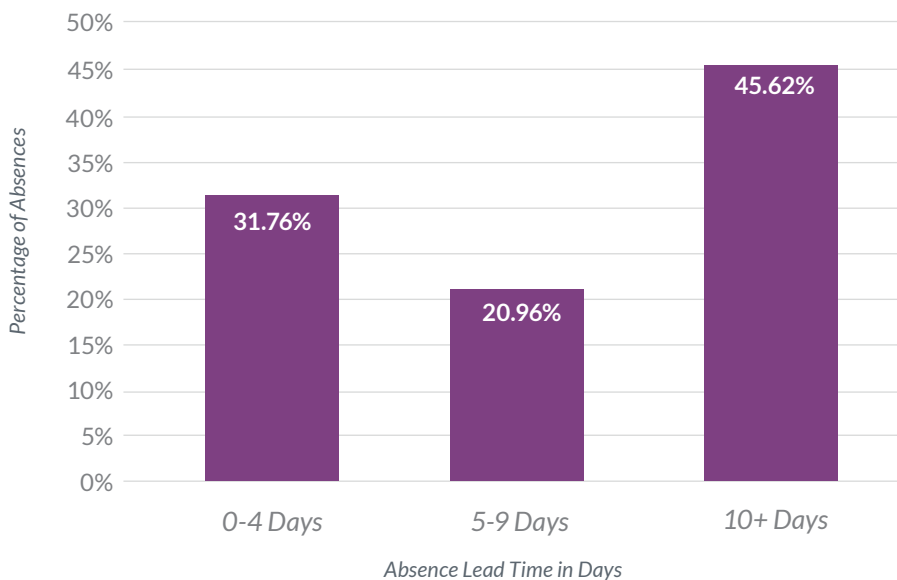

Figure 7
Frequency of Absence Lead-time Intervals for Professionally Related Absences Requiring a Substitute

Note: An additional 1.66% of absences are entered after the absence occurs.

Figure 8 further illustrates the importance of absence lead time, where data show a steady decline in fill rates as absence lead time lessens. This chart represents all professionally related absences requiring a substitute.

Figure 8
Fill Rates by Absence Lead Time

Average Fill Rate

85%
93% 93%
95%
96% 96% 96% 96% 96%
97%

Absence Lead Time in Days
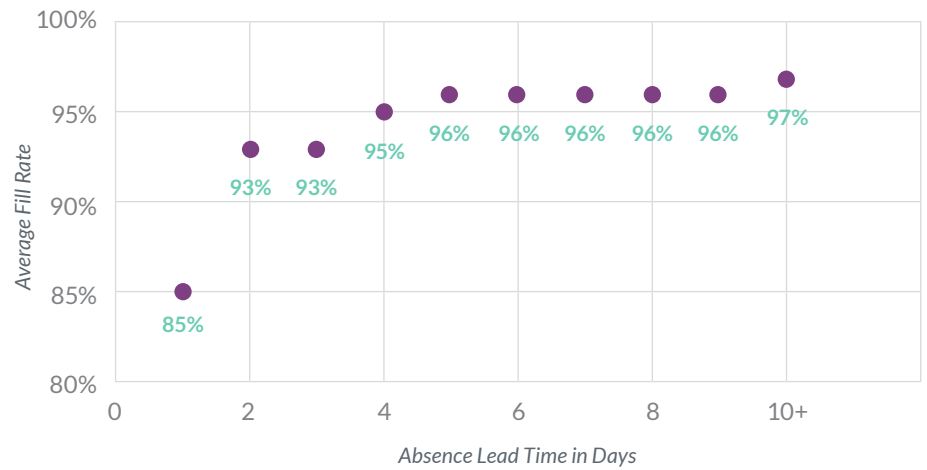
KEY FINDINGS

- *Over half of professionally related absences requiring a substitute are reported less than 10 days before the absence occurs.*

- *In many instances, absence lead time is shorter than would be expected for professionally related absences, which shortens planning and preparation time.*

- *Shorter lead times have a negative effect on fill rates.*

What the Practitioners Say: Primary Market Research

To ascertain how practitioners view the incidence and impacts of employee absences, Frontline Technologies, with assistance from the Center for Research and Reform at Johns Hopkins University, developed a survey distributed to organization- and district-level personnel. Results of the primary market research, and an analysis to how practitioners' perceptions align to what the data indicate, are reviewed below.

Perception vs. Reality

One focus of the survey was to investigate perceptions around professionally related absences and the degree to which Instructional and Human Resources offices share these perceptions.

Survey Question: *Provide your best estimate of the percentage of total employee absences that are professionally related.*

More than 80% of the respondents believe that the incidence of professionally related absences is less than 40% (Figure 9). In contrast, extremely few estimate such absences to exceed 60% of the total percentage of absences.
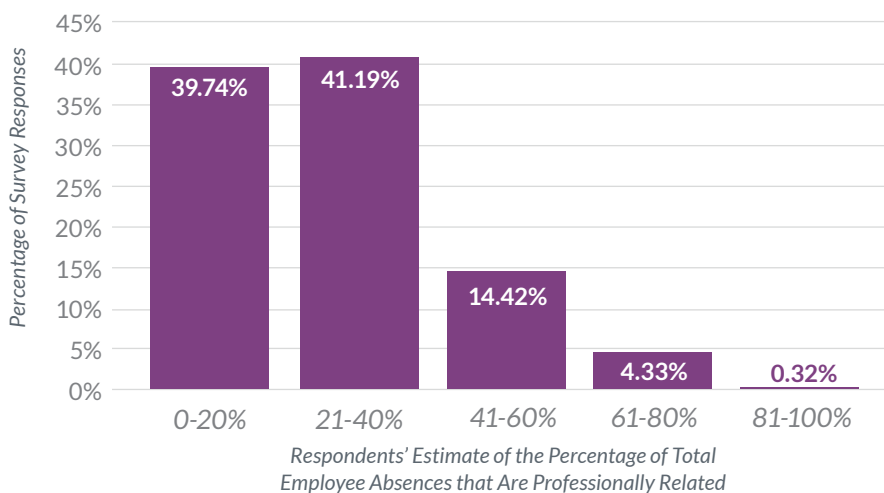
Figure 9
Estimated Incidence of Professionally Related Absences

Percentage of Survey Responses

Estimate	Percentage
0-20%	39.74%
21-40%	41.19%
41-60%	14.42%
61-80%	4.33%
81-100%	0.32%

Respondents' Estimate of the Percentage of Total Employee Absences that Are Professionally Related

When the same questions are examined by district-level role, some differences appear (see Figure 10).

Figure 10
Estimated Incidence of Professionally related Absences

Business / Finance

Curriculum & Instruction

Human Resources

Superintendent
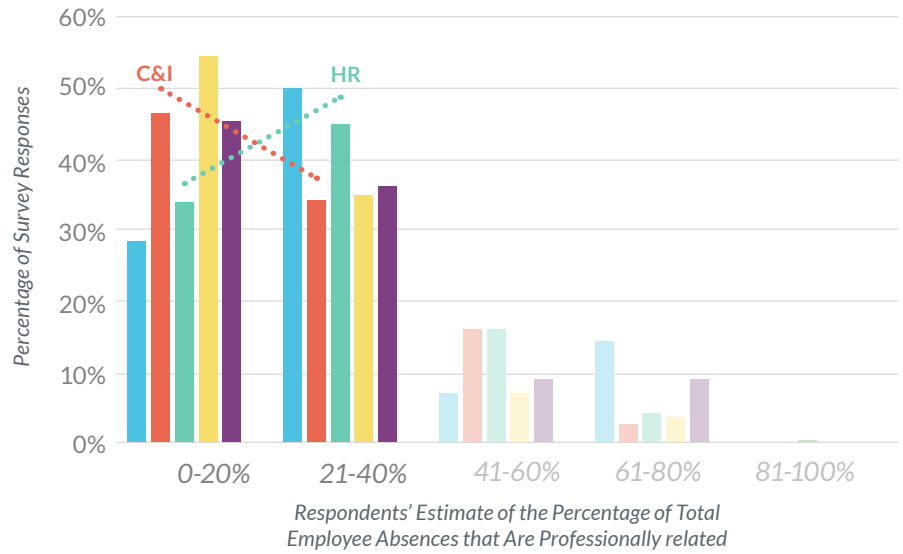
Technology

	0-20%	21-40%	41-60%	61-80%	81-100%
Business / Finance	28.57%	50.00%	7.14%	14.29%	0.00%
Curriculum & Instruction	46.67%	34.29%	16.19%	2.86%	0.00%
Human Resources	34.13%	45.07%	16.27%	4.27%	0.27%
Superintendent	54.39%	35.09%	7.02%	3.51%	0.00%
Technology	45.45%	36.36%	9.09%	9.09%	0.00%

KEY FINDINGS

- *Superintendents and Curriculum and Instruction personnel are the most likely to perceive professionally related absences as relatively infrequent (i.e., less than 20% of all absences).*

- *Business and Human Resources personnel are the most likely to perceive such absences as relatively frequent (i.e., greater than 20% of all absences).*

Survey Question: *In your opinion, time spent on professionally related absences is:*
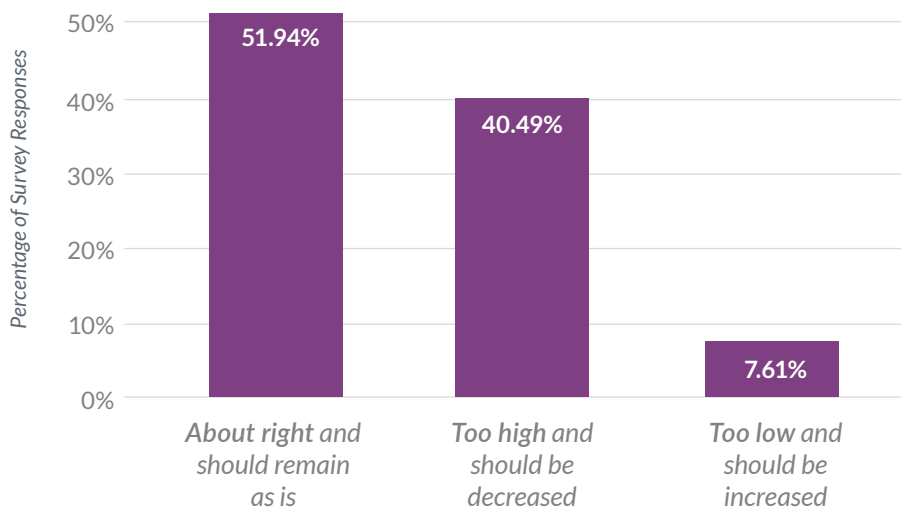

Figure 11
Opinion on Time Spent on Professionally related Absences

The overall sentiment is that few think the time spent on professionally related absences should be increased. According to the data (see Figure 4), these absences have in fact seen a slight decrease over the last three years.

Further breakdown of the results by role, however, suggests the sentiments identified above are not consistent. As shown in Figure 12, Curriculum and Instruction personnel tend to be much more satisfied with the amount of time spent on professionally related absences than are Human Resources personnel.
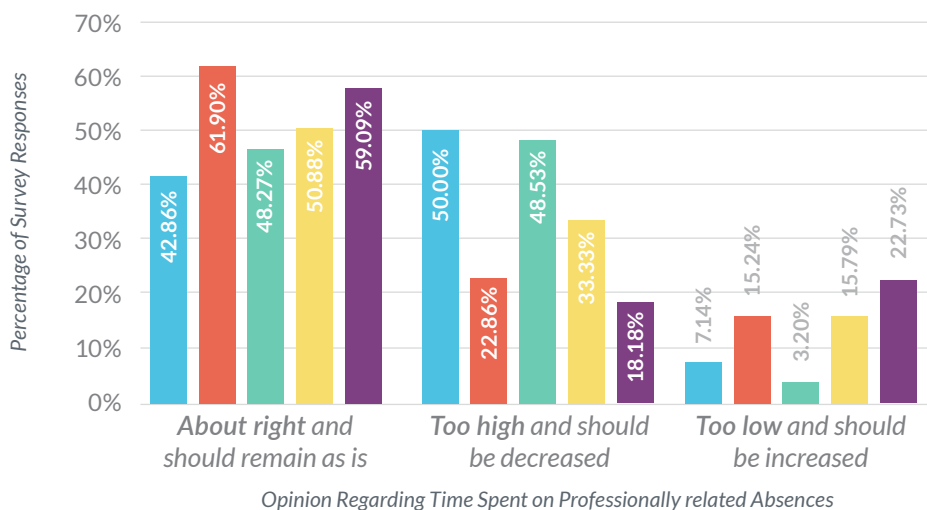

Opinion Regarding Time Spent on Professionally related Absences

Figure 12
Opinion on Time Spent by Employees on Professionally related Absences by District-Level Roles

- Business / Finance
- Curriculum & Instruction
- Human Resources
- Superintendent
- Technology

KEY FINDINGS

- *Close to half of Human Resources personnel feel that professionally related absences should be decreased, while hardly any support an increase.*

- *Nearly 75% of Curriculum & Instruction personnel believe that professionally related absences should be maintained or increased.*

- *Technology personnel are the most likely of all groups to support an increase in professionally related absences.*

How Much Do District Offices Collaborate?

As noted in the survey results, Human Resources professionals and those in Curriculum and Instruction roles tend to have different perceptions on whether or not more time should be spent on professionally-related absences.

Survey Question: *In your organization, to what extent do the Human Resources and Instructional departments collaborate on managing professionally related absences?*

Figure 13
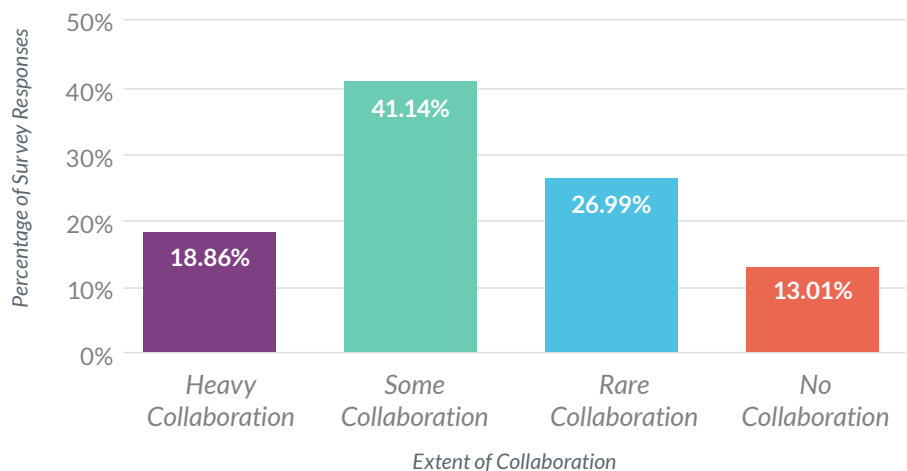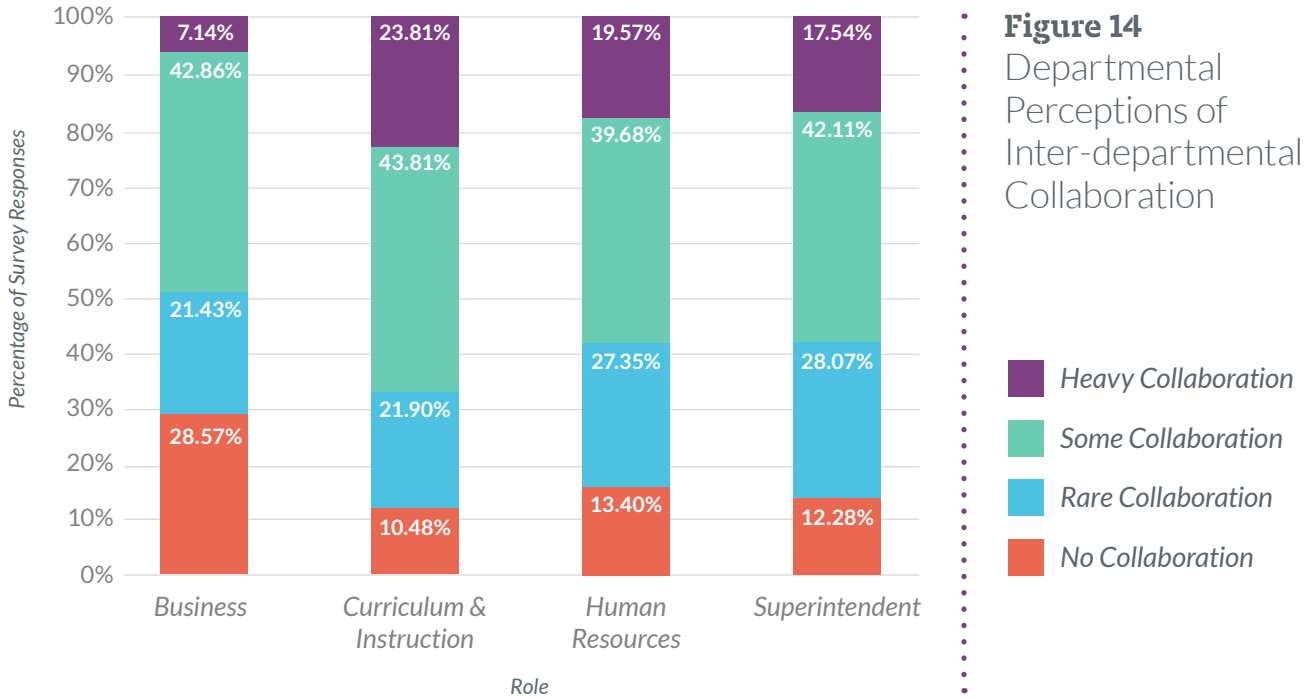Collaboration Between Human Resources and Instructional Departments

Figure 13 indicates that 40% of respondents say collaboration around professionally related absences is either rare or non-existent.

Interestingly, the departments differ in their perceptions about collaboration (Figure 14). Results are similar in that no group sees collaboration as very heavy, but those in Curriculum and Instruction perceive collaboration to be somewhat stronger than do those in Human Resources.

Figure 14
Departmental Perceptions of Inter-departmental Collaboration

- Heavy Collaboration
- Some Collaboration
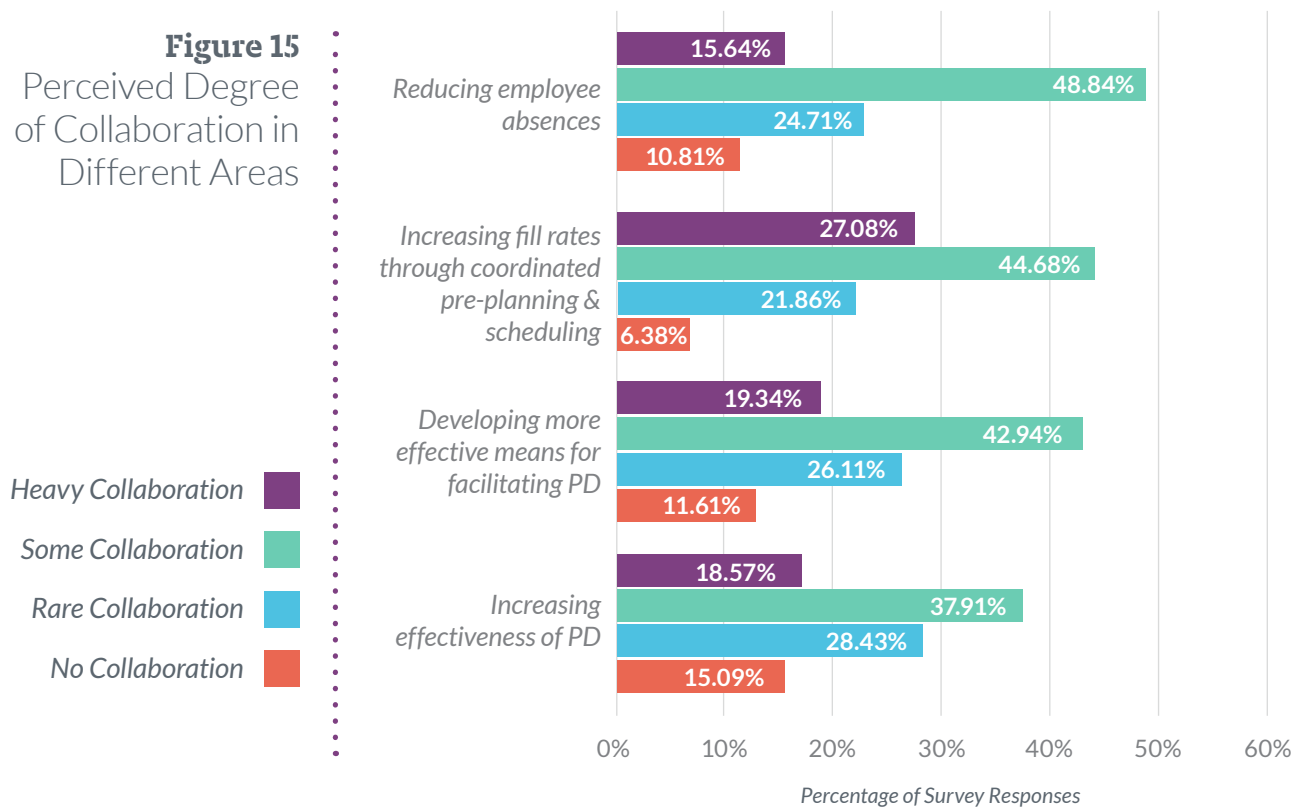- Rare Collaboration
- No Collaboration

Focuses of Collaboration

According to the district-level staff, inter-departmental collaborations are stronger and weaker in different areas. As shown in Figure 15:

- The heaviest amount of collaboration occurs around *increasing fill rates through coordinated planning and scheduling* (72% heavy or some; 6% none).

- The least amount of collaboration occurs around *increasing the effectiveness of professional development* (56% heavy or some; 15% none) and *facilitating professional development* (62% heavy or some; 12% none).

Figure 15
Perceived Degree of Collaboration in Different Areas

Heavy Collaboration
Some Collaboration
Rare Collaboration
No Collaboration

Reducing employee absences
- 15.64%
- 48.84%
- 24.71%
- 10.81%

Increasing fill rates through coordinated pre-planning & scheduling
- 27.08%
- 44.68%
- 21.86%
- 6.38%

Developing more effective means for facilitating PD
- 19.34%
- 42.94%
- 26.11%
- 11.61%

Increasing effectiveness of PD
- 18.57%
- 37.91%
- 28.43%
- 15.09%

Percentage of Survey Responses

KEY FINDINGS

- *District offices collaborate only rarely to moderately on dealing with professionally related absences.*

- *Business and Human Resources personnel view the collaborations as less frequent than do Curriculum and Instruction personnel and the Superintendent.*

- *Collaborations are perceived as stronger for increasing fill rates than for increasing the effectiveness of professional development, facilitating professional development and reducing employee absences.*

Overall the survey results suggest room for greater and more sustained collaboration, which perhaps could increase efficiency by:

- *Examining the causes for and impacts of delays in reporting absences*

- *Developing strategies to reduce professionally related absences, increase absence lead time and ensure absences are filled by substitutes.*

Conclusions

The analyses of reviewed data and school district survey responses support the following overall conclusions:

- *Professionally related absences account for approximately one-fifth of all absences (almost three per employee per year). Of these absences, approximately half (or 10% of all absences) are related specifically to professional development.*

- *Employees who are absent and require a substitute to cover their absences are more than twice as likely to be out for professionally related reasons than those who do not require a substitute.*

- *While the number of professionally related absences has decreased over the last three years, the number of absences specifically for professional development has remained relatively steady during the same time period.*

- *Despite professionally related absences decreasing, the fill rate associated with these absences has decreased over the past three years, meaning it is more difficult to find substitutes for these absences.*

- *The ability to fill absences with a substitute is directly impacted by the lead time with which the absence is reported. Approximately one-third of professional absences requiring a substitute are reported within four days of occurrence, contributing to lower fill rates. Presumably, these absences are in fact scheduled long in advance.*

- *Common understandings and collaboration to deal with absences effectively are fairly weak across district offices.*

- *Developing strategies to increase and improve inter-departmental collaborations for dealing with absences is strongly recommended.*

Suggested Strategies for Increasing Collaboration

- Use absence trend data to identify low absence and substitute utilization days. Plan high attendance professionally related leave events on these days to increase fill rates.

- Share plans for professionally related leave events prior to enrolling employees (i.e. math workshop for 30 teachers on Tuesday, April 12). If teachers do neglect to request a substitute, Human Resources can proactively remind those who enroll to enter the absence, increasing the likelihood of finding a substitute and reducing last-minute planning for principals.

- Identify district initiatives that teachers and employees are being trained on that may be necessary for substitutes as well to maintain a high level of instruction when a substitute is in place (ex: new child abuse reporting requirements or new lesson plan formats/strategies).

- Review internal coverage options for shorter absences or low-need areas where substitutes may not be as necessary. If there are internal options available or a substitute is not really needed, cover the absence internally so that the substitute can be assigned to a high-need area at another school.

- Collaborative planning at a district level will help level the number of professionally related absences between schools and departments. Awareness of events in other locations will allow for more effective planning for substitute coverage.

- Collaboratively identify alternative scheduling for job-embedded professional learning designs that do not require teacher absences as part of comprehensive, sustainable professional development.

Scope of Data

Data included in this report were obtained from Aesop (the Frontline Technologies teacher absence and substitute placement database), compiled over a three-year period (July 1, 2012-June 30, 2015) from 4,553 client organizations. As displayed in Figure 16, the data include 3,901 school districts, varying in size and geographic type.

Figure 16
School Districts in Aesop Included in the Report Data

District Size	District Type		
	Urban	**Suburban**	**Rural**
Small	5	106	361
Medium	145	1,108	1,571
Large	131	162	102
Extra Large	59	56	17

Educational organizations other than public school districts included:

- Educational service agencies = 237
- Charter schools = 202
- Other = 195

Employees

In total, the Aesop data encompass 2,667,888 employees.

- 2,208,725 (82.7%) of employees are in a position requiring a substitute for absences
- 459,163 (17.3%) of employees are in a position not requiring a substitute

Survey Study on Employee Absences

- Conducted: January 2016
- Surveys Distributed: 40,802
- Surveys Received: 690

The survey was sent to the following roles:

- Human Resources
- Curriculum & Instruction
- Professional Development
- Executive/Superintendent

Validation of Data

Aesop data on employee absences were obtained from 3,901 participating school districts varying in size and geographic type. A review of the district sample relative to U.S. school district norms (as reported by the National Center for Educational Statistics) was conducted by the Center for Research and Reform in Education (CRRE) and Johns Hopkins University (Ross & Morrison, 2016).[1] Results indicated a high degree of comparability on four key variables examined reflecting the percentages of:

- Students enrolled in different types of districts based on size and geographic location,

- The district types represented,

- Different ethnicities by district type and total,

- Low-income students by district types.

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[1]   Ross & Morrison (2016). Sample Representativeness Analysis: Aesop Clients vs. National Norms. Center for Research and Reform in Education at Johns Hopkins University.

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