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Missing in Newark: Its Teachers

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By BARBARA MARTINEZ

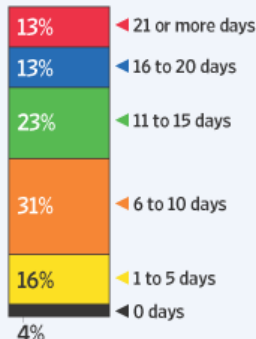
Poor attendance has been plaguing the beleaguered Newark schools—but the teachers are the ones missing class.

Nearly half of all Newark teachers took at least two weeks of sick leave last year, and more than a quarter of them took three weeks or more off.

The district instituted an attendance-improvement program in October, but even so about 7% of the district's teachers are absent on an average day, nearly twice the urban-district average of 4%, said Valerie Merritt, a spokeswoman for the system.

Ill Instruction

Number of sick and personal days taken by Newark teachers in the 2008-09 school year



Note: Includes all Newark Teachers Union instructional employees
Source: Newark Public Schools

With more than 40,000 students, Newark represents one of the largest and most vexing school systems in the Northeast. The district was taken over by the state in 1995 and since then has seen three state-appointed superintendents and little change in student performance.

The teachers' contract, which will expire this month and is currently under negotiation, is one of Gov. Chris Christie's few chances to influence the work rules of a New Jersey school district. Newark's absentee numbers are "completely unacceptable," said Michael Drewniak, a spokesman for Mr. Christie, who would ultimately approve or reject the teachers' contract. "That kind of history certainly doesn't work in favor of the union and its negotiating position unless that problem can be fixed."

Under the expiring contract, most Newark teachers get 18 paid sick and personal days off during the school year, and those with 25 years or more of service get up to 28 days out of their 191-day school year. By contrast, in New York City, teachers get 10 sick days and three of those can be used for personal business.

Jonah Rockoff, a Columbia University business school professor who has studied the harmful effects on students of teacher absenteeism in New York City, said the rates in Newark suggest that for students of teachers out the most, it "surely makes the difference between passing and failing" certain subjects.

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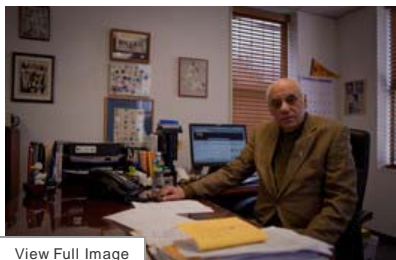
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Juan Alredondo for The Wall Street Journal
The president of the Newark Teachers Union, Joseph Del Grosso, at his office on Broad Street in Newark.

Newark Teachers Post High Absence R...

"A contract that makes it easy for teachers to take lots of days off may not be attracting the kind of professionals that Newark parents would want for their kids," Mr. Rockoff said, noting that Newark's absenteeism rates are twice that of New York City.

Joseph Del Grosso, the president of the Newark Teachers Union, attributes the large absences to either stress or the impending retirement of some teachers, who may want to take some of the portion of their accrued sick days that they can't cash out.

Asked whether the teachers have a duty to work if they're not actually sick, he said: "We're not priests or nuns."

He doesn't expect sick days to be an issue in the current contract negotiations.

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