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## 'A' is for absent teachers

By **CHRISTINA DeNARDO**

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Reading teacher Suzanne Grady rarely misses a day of school. Over her 23 years as an educator, she has racked up more than 70 unused sick days.

Grady and her colleagues at Polo Park Middle decreased absenteeism by 26 percent last year, socking away sick days and earning hundreds of dollars each in incentives through a Palm Beach County School District pilot program.

But Polo Park is the exception.

The attendance incentive program, in which teachers cash out unused sick leave or earn a bonus if absenteeism falls, failed



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at most other schools. Of the 20 schools in the pilot last year, 15 had more sick days used than the year before, with the number of absences rising by nearly 30 percent at some.

Teacher absenteeism is a growing problem, and often when teachers call in sick, schools struggle to fill their place. Every day as many as 900 teachers don't make it to school, and there are far fewer substitutes to replace them, forcing schools to combine classes, cancel classes and cancel teacher meetings.

Teachers get 10 days of leave annually, including six that can be used for personal leave. They can carry over four sick days each year, giving many veteran teachers a stash of dozens. They can cash out those days at 100 percent at retirement.

Others either don't think that far ahead or have no choice but to take their sick days. Lots of teachers have young children, and when the children get sick the teachers stay home to care for them. Schools are also germ factories, and when students get sick, teachers often do, too.

Principal Helen Gleicher at Cholee Lake Elementary in Greenacres, saw her teacher absenteeism rise by 19 percent last year. She attributed the rise to teacher pregnancies and illnesses. One teacher took off a significant amount of time for back surgery, another was on leave to care for a sick husband and others took maternity leave.

"The teachers tried very hard about being here because it puts more work on them when they're out of school," Gleicher said. "When you have a staff that big, things happen. You have to be there. Family is number one."

But the reasons for absences are not always clear. Like many other employers, principals don't require a doctor's note each time someone calls in sick, although they can if a teacher takes four consecutive sick days.

"It's still the honors system," said Van Ludy, the district's head of labor relations. "We're not going to check anyone with a microscope."

In response to the growing absences over the years, the district created the incentive program. At some schools, teachers who did not use any sick days could cash them in for 80 percent of their daily salary. At other schools, the district compared the number of teacher absences from the previous year, and for each day attendance increased, teachers would earn \$70.

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At Polo Park Middle in Wellington, Principal Marcia Andrews publicized the program throughout the year at faculty meetings. When teachers would miss school and a substitute could not be found, their students would be sent to other teachers, giving teachers even more reason not to miss school.

"Now, our peers are covering our butt," said Grady, the reading teacher. "Sometimes when your peers have to pick up the slack you feel guilty. It was kind of like peer pressure."

Teachers took a total of 215 fewer days compared to the year before and will be awarded about \$213 each, money the district would have used to hire substitutes.

"The district dangled a carrot and we took it," Grady said.

Only four other schools showed reduced absenteeism - Palm Springs Elementary, Plumosa Elementary, Lake Worth Middle and Olympic Heights High - giving officials little reason to continue the program.

Across the country, similar incentive programs have failed to curb absenteeism. Some say those who often benefit from incentives are those who are rarely absent.

But Dwight D. Eisenhower Elementary Principal James Pegg says incentives can work: Attendance dropped 28 percent from the previous year at his school. He attributes the wider rise in absenteeism to the serious illnesses of a few teachers who were out for more than a week.

Meanwhile, 328 teachers at 11 schools used four or fewer sick days last year, allowing them to cash in at 80 percent of their salary.

Pegg, who rewards teachers with perfect attendance with gift certificates to the movies and shopping malls, said incentives have to be based on individual performance to be effective.

When the program was examined, it was found that teachers who didn't miss work were punished for the actions of their colleagues.

Attendance incentive programs geared toward secretaries, custodians and bus drivers have proven more effective because they reward attendance monthly, so more employees can earn a bonus.

With the teacher incentive program ineffective, the district has tried other ways to curb absenteeism. Earlier this year, it proposed to allow principals to punish employees who can't verify an illness, require routine doctor's appointments to be scheduled after school or on weekends, and it wanted to prohibit teachers from taking time off before and during the FCAT.

Though nothing came from any of those proposals, the district could offer more ideas in the future.

"We're looking for any which way we can to reduce sick leave," said Ludy, the district labor relations chief.

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