

# TEACHER ABSENTEEISM: CHALLENGES TO PUBLIC EDUCATION POLICIES

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## Abstract

The article describes the phenomenon of absenteeism among municipal teachers in the city of São Paulo and seeks to understand how education professionals view teacher nonattendance and organize to face this problem in schools. Based on a bibliographic review, a statistical descriptive analysis was conducted with variables related to public servant absences and the profile of professionals in the teacher workforce. In addition, the results collected through interviews in twenty school units were analyzed. The study recommends for improvements to be outlined in teachers' working conditions, aiming particularly to reduce the excessive number of students per classroom, raise wage levels in order to prevent accumulation of positions, and invest in the teaching career so as to make it more attractive.

EDUCATION POLICY • EDUCATION MANAGEMENT • ABSENTEEISM •  
TEACHERS' WORKING CONDITIONS

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## ABSENTEÍSMO DOCENTE: DESAFIOS PARA AS POLÍTICAS PÚBLICAS EDUCACIONAIS

### Resumo

O artigo descreve o fenômeno do absenteísmo entre os servidores municipais da cidade de São Paulo e busca compreender como os profissionais da educação entendem a falta docente e se organizam para enfrentar esse problema na escola. A partir de uma revisão bibliográfica, fez-se a análise estatística descritiva de variáveis relacionadas a ausências dos servidores e perfil dos profissionais pertencentes ao quadro do magistério, bem como a análise dos resultados coletados por meio de entrevistas em vinte unidades escolares. O estudo recomenda que sejam delineadas melhorias das condições de trabalho dos professores, buscando, em especial, diminuir o número excessivo de alunos por sala de aula, aumentar os níveis salariais a fim de prevenir o acúmulo de cargos e investir na carreira do magistério, tornando-a mais atraente.

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## ABSENTISMO DOCENTE: DESAFÍOS PARA LAS POLÍTICAS PÚBLICAS EDUCATIVAS

### Resumen

El artículo describe el fenómeno del absentismo entre los servidores municipales de la ciudad de São Paulo y busca comprender cómo los profesionales de la educación entienden la escasez de docentes y se organizan para enfrentar este problema en la escuela. A partir de una revisión bibliográfica, se realizó un análisis estadístico descriptivo de variables relacionadas con la ausencia de los servidores y el perfil de los profesionales pertenecientes al cuerpo docente, así como el análisis de los resultados recogidos a través de entrevistas en veinte unidades escolares. El estudio recomienda que sean delimitadas mejoras de las condiciones de trabajo de los profesores, buscando, en especial, reducir el número excesivo de alumnos por sala de clase, aumentar los niveles salariales con la finalidad de evitar la acumulación de puestos, e invertir en la carrera docente, haciéndola más atractiva.

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CONDICIONES DEL TRABAJO DOCENTE

## ABSENTÉISME DES ENSEIGNANTS: DÉFIS AUX POLITIQUES PUBLIQUES DE L'ÉDUCATION

### Résumé

L'article décrit le phénomène de l'absentéisme chez les fonctionnaires municipaux de la ville de São Paulo (Brésil) et cherche à comprendre comment les professionnels de l'éducation envisagent le manque au travail des enseignants et comment s'organisent-ils pour faire face à ce problème à l'école. À partir d'une revue bibliographique, on a entrepris l'analyse statistique descriptive des variables liées aux absences des employés et au profil des professionnels du cadre enseignant, aussi bien que l'analyse des résultats obtenus après des interviews auprès de vingt unités scolaires. L'étude propose que l'on apporte des améliorations aux conditions de travail des enseignants, surtout en ce qui concerne la réduction de la quantité excessive d'élèves par salle de classe; l'augmentation des salaires afin de prévenir l'accumulation de postes de travail; et l'investissement dans la filière enseignante, pour qu'elle devienne plus attrayante.

POLITIQUES DE L'ÉDUCATION • GESTION DE L'ÉDUCATION • ABSENTÉISME •  
CONDITIONS DU TRAVAIL ENSEIGNANT

**D**EVELOPED OVER 2019 AND 2020, THE STUDY EXAMINED TEACHER ABSENTEEISM IN the São Paulo municipal education system, a phenomenon characterized by these public servants' absence from work due to different factors, such as health problems, legal rights, accidents, and issues related to the social and cultural context which, combined, end up impacting the organizational climate<sup>1</sup> of schools. In education, while this is known to be a major problem, the absence of teachers from schools is still a field to be better explored. There are few investigations about teacher absenteeism in the São Paulo municipal education system, and part of these are exploratory in nature, as consolidated data about teachers' absences are not always available. This shortage of studies is therefore the theoretical justification for studying absenteeism and its consequences within schools. From the perspective of social relevance, this is a phenomenon whose consequences are extremely harmful for the implementation of a consistent pedagogical project focused on the teaching and learning processes and which promotes the successful permanence of students in schools that provide them with quality education. Considering this context, the article presents a qualitative analysis of the phenomenon of absenteeism, conducted within a research carried out in twenty municipal schools in different areas of the city of São Paulo, in order to understand how education professionals analyze this phenomenon, and how they organize to face teacher absence in schools and the challenges therefrom.

### Teacher absenteeism: A literature review and legal provisions

By means of a bibliographic survey carried out on the Scientific Electronic Library Online (SciELO), on the web portal of Coordenação de Aperfeiçoamento de Pessoal de Nível Superior [Coordination for the Improvement of Higher Education Personnel] (Capes), and on Google Scholar, it was found that most of the academic output on the subject of absenteeism is in the field of health, particularly in nursing, involving primarily nurses and technical personnel. On the Capes' portal, other studies were also found in public administration. About absenteeism in teaching, the bibliographic survey indicated few studies. According to the literature review conducted by Souza and Quadros (2017), of the master's theses and dissertations produced in the period from 2006 to 2016, 2 works about the subject in education were defended in the 2006-2008 interval, and 20 others from 2009 onwards. This number of works was obtained using the descriptors "absenteeism", "teacher precariousness", "teacher malaise", and "teacher absence and nonattendance", both individually and combined.

Since it is a topic of human resources management, discussions about absenteeism have been founded on public administration concepts. In the works found, the concept that has been informing works (Tavares et al, 2009; Porto, 2010) is the one by Chiavenato (2004), whose book, in the field business administration, was first published in 1979. The definition of absenteeism, according to the author, is an individual's absence from work, whether due to delay or nonattendance. Thus, it also refers to partially completed work hours in cases of late entry or early exit (Delchiaro, 2009).

Absenteeism can be caused by several factors: illness, legal rights, accidents, and social and cultural factors (Flores et al., 2016). Health-related factors have been investigated in the

<sup>1</sup> Organizational climate results from the perceptions and feelings of the individuals involved in a corporation, affecting people's productivity in a positive or a negative way. In schools, the concept has been replaced by "school climate", also referring to individuals' perception, though on more specific dimensions of the school space and comprising: teaching activities, relationships between teachers and the school community, pedagogical and administrative processes specific to the school organization, goals and principles that guide educational work, among others (Melo & Morais, 2019; Vinha et al., 2016).

organizational and corporate field as they not only pose a significant problem, but also cause, in particular, several work absences (Spósito & Gimenes, 2014; Andrade et al., 2017; Altoé, 2010; Flores et al., 2016; Martinato et al., 2010).

Absenteeism in education, in turn, constitutes a situation that implies, on the one hand, illnesses resulting from work, and on the other, significant economic and social costs, considering teachers' health and the harm caused to basic education students. A group of studies were found in the literature which pointed to absenteeism as a phenomenon closely related to precarious working conditions and stressors that result in illnesses. In general, these studies aim to better understand the reasons for nonattendance at the workplace in order to inform strategies that can protect and promote the health of teachers and concomitantly improve student outcomes (Chen, 2016; Soares & Silva, 2002; Spósito & Gimenes, 2014; Altoé, 2010).

Flores et al. (2016) pointed out that, in 2005, the Secretaria de Gestão Pública do Estado de São Paulo [São Paulo State Department of Public Management] conducted a survey to identify the causes of absenteeism among state civil servants. The main identified causes included mental and behavioral disorders. The survey also indicated that, in 2005, there were 5.5 million absences in a workforce of 444,000 civil servants from direct public administration, not including paid absences legally provided for. These absences mean that, in that year, a worker had 10 absences for each 100 working days.

As mentioned earlier, part of the studies consulted about teacher absenteeism in the municipality of São Paulo is exploratory in nature, due to the difficulty to obtain the necessary data for a broader study. The investigations that sought to understand the types of teacher absenteeism and its reasons (Santos, 2006; Gesqui, 2008, 2014) created tailor-made data collection forms, and therefore had a limited scope, as they did not even include a sample of schools of the system.

Santos (2006), in a study that investigated teacher absenteeism in the municipality of São Paulo from 2004 to 2005, stressed that the Grupo de Pesquisa em Ciência da Informação e Educação [Research Group on Information Science and Education] (Ciedu) of the Secretaria Municipal de Educação de São Paulo [Municipal Education Department of São Paulo] (SMESP) did not provide data on medical leaves and paid absences. Their dissertation covered five schools, using the spatial distribution of units as a sample selection criteria. It was found that the total number of teacher absences in the surveyed schools and the yearly absence means per teacher did not change significantly from one year to the other, leading to the conclusion that nonattendance, at least in this municipality, seemed to be part of the school culture.

Gesqui (2008, 2014) followed 12 classes of the later years of basic education in a public school located in Greater São Paulo. In that school, the author collected and recorded, during 200 school days, information about teachers' daily attendance, absence types, and the justifications given. Thus, he identified that part of the absences that occurred during the study fell under legal provisions and that only 64.4% of the total of scheduled classes were taught by the disciplines' regular teachers. Of these absences, 15.4% were legally provided for, and were covered by occasional teachers. In the other situations, the classes were vacant or the students were dismissed by the school, as the absences had no legal justification and therefore could not be covered by occasional teachers. The author also pointed out that these absences were not officially recorded, and happened with the connivance of the principal, in what the author called a "home arrangement". There were also the absences designated as "funfair", as they operated like a balance of hours that teachers accumulated by exceeding their work hours doing out-of-school activities with students.

Teacher nonattendance in the school unit was controlled, according to Gesqui (2014), through the teacher's signature in the time sheet book. The student inspector recorded on a separate spreadsheet the attendance of each teacher, and the school's secretary compared both records to

make the payment. In case of absence, the teacher would provide the secretary with a document justifying the absence – a medical certificate or request for paid absence. In turn, the secretary would record the justification in the time sheet book using specific code and, at the end of the month, the principal was asked to approve (or reject) the justifications submitted. Finally, they were recorded on the teacher's (official) attendance sheet.

Given the possibility of substitute or occasional teachers, as mentioned by Gesqui (2014), this role, renamed as *workweek complementation teacher* (CJ, which stands for the Portuguese *complementação de jornada*) in the São Paulo municipal education system was, as of 2007, investigated by Americano (2011), through a qualitative study, which was therefore not intended for generalization. The CJ teacher's duties were limited to substituting the class's regular teacher and conducting activities that might help the latter as well as students with difficulties. The study highlights that the exhaustive replacement of teachers was carried out without consistency between what was taught by regular and CJ teachers, i.e., it was only used as a resource to avoid "leaving students without a teacher", a situation that caused curricular fragmentation.

Jacinto (2016) conducted in his master's dissertation a qualitative study in which he investigated teacher nonattendance in two school units in the Jardim Ângela district, in São Paulo. The data for 2013 and 2014 were researched in documents from the institutions and through interviews with the Portuguese and mathematics teachers, in order to understand the reasons for the absences. The author thereby rendered a description of the types of teacher absences recorded monthly by the schools. The conclusion reached in the study is noteworthy: teachers as a whole used absences of the paid type, considering them as rights to be enjoyed, implying that they would fail to attend because there were opportunities for this, without detriment to their careers and wages.

Tavares et al. (2009) found that, in the São Paulo state education system, on a single school day, around 12,000 tenured teachers were absent from their classrooms. Moreover, 90 class hours were lost due to lack of substitution, which caused not only harm to teaching and learning processes, but also significant financial waste. Thus, in 2006, as indicated by the authors, BRL 235.4 million were spent to cover the costs of the absenteeism observed in the Secretaria de Educação do Estado de São Paulo [São Paulo State Department of Education] (SEE-SP). Considering the absence average, teachers were absent for 18 days in that year, which corresponds to 8% of school days.

Finally, the study by Tavares and Honda (2021) analyzed, based on information from the São Paulo state system, the School Census and the Sistema de Avaliação de Rendimento Escolar do Estado de São Paulo [São Paulo State School Performance Assessment System] (Saesp) for 2007, the factors associated with teacher absenteeism, using a model that relates teacher nonattendance to teacher attributes (age, service time, among others) and to school and student characteristics. The results showed that the absences were associated with "health problems, opportunity cost and the chances of being punished" (Tavares & Honda, 2021, p. 601, own translation). Schools with students with lower socioeconomic status and poor working conditions were the ones with more absences, indicating that the decision not to attend work were also due to the institutional environment. In terms of recommendations, the authors suggested that, in order to reduce absenteeism, public policies that considered school and student profile would be necessary.

Given that only nonattendance instances were considered in the definition of absenteeism, leaves were treated, in the present research, as absences, since longer teacher leaves create, in the vast majority of cases, a problem for school management, besides negatively affecting schools' climate and the quality of education. Taking this into account, absenteeism was defined in this study as a phenomenon that comprehends full and partial absences, as well as all legally defined leaves (maternity, bereavement, marriage, medical, etc.).



The Estatuto do Funcionário Público do Município de São Paulo [Public Servant Statute of the Municipality of São Paulo] sets forth that public servants can request leave from their work obligations in several circumstances: for health treatments; in cases of illness of family members; to perform legally mandatory services; and for private interests. Apart from health-related and voluntary absences, the statute also provides for compulsory absence in case of infectious and contagious diseases and for leaves due to work accidents or occupational disease, as described in its article 138, items I, II, and IV to VII. Another legal mechanism are the paid absences, in which the public servant is absent but no pay reductions are applied. During a year, public servants of the municipality of São Paulo can have ten paid absences, not exceeding two in a month. However, paid absences must have a justified reason, at the discretion of the competent authority (art. 92, Lei n. 8.989, 1979).

The Decreto [Decree] n. 24.146 (1987, own translation), which regulates aspects of Estatuto do Funcionário Público do Município de São Paulo, classifies, in its article 2, the absences of municipal public servants into: “a) paid; b) justified; c) unjustified; in addition to highlighting absences for ‘blood donation’ and ‘attending school exams and tests’”. Thus, a public servant who has their absence deemed a paid absence will not incur wage discounts or damage to their career progression (art. 3<sup>rd</sup>, Decreto n. 24.146, 1987). As for justified absences, they can reach six in a year and, unlike paid absences, they cause wage discounts, but still no other effect on the servant’s career. Unjustified absences, in turn, can reach sixty in a year, provided they are not uninterrupted – comprehending up to 30 consecutive days – and entail wage discounts and damage in terms of career progression. Thus, it is legally permitted that, in extreme cases, teachers can be absent from work for 76 days over a year, using justified, unjustified and paid absences (Santos, 2006).

### Methodological procedures

The study was developed in two phases: one quantitative and the other qualitative. The first phase aimed to describe how absenteeism was configured according to type of absence of SMESP public servants and to deepen the statistical analysis of the teacher workforce, considering variables related to career and work hours. To conduct this phase, the authors were granted access to the database of public servants of Secretaria Municipal de Educação.

The qualitative phase, conducted with an intentional sample of twenty schools under different Diretorias Regionais de Educação [Regional Boards of Education] (DRE) of the municipality, sought to identify the strategies employed by the institutions to deal with absences, as well as understand some views of the subjects about the topic. The school selection criteria were the following: average number of absences of public servants at the school unit in 2018; school location, in order to cover all DRE, and their management complexity (Instituto Nacional de Estudos e Pesquisas Educacionais Anísio Teixeira [Inep], 2014).

The descriptive analysis of data began with a longitudinal analysis for the period from 2009 to 2018 about the types of absence related to the group of public servants employed by the SMESP (teacher workforce – TCH; specialist workforce – SPC; support workforce – SUP; and other workers – OTH). Then, a more in-depth analysis was conducted about absences in the teacher workforce for 2018, in which variables of teacher profile, career, working conditions and work hours were associated with the average of absence events in the year and the average of absence days in the year.

The research hypothesis explored here is the following: are teachers who work more weekly hours or at more than one school more often absent than the others?

The initial plan was to interview, in each school, its principal, pedagogical coordinators and a single teacher, recommended by the pedagogical coordinator as a consistently present worker.<sup>2</sup> In all, at the 20 school units selected, 20 principals, 21 pedagogical coordinators (distributed over 19 schools) and 18 consistently present teachers were interviewed. With regard to teachers, interviews were not possible at two schools, since the recommended teachers chose not to participate in this phase of the study.

The interviews had different purposes. Those with principals explored the types of absence occurring in the school and the strategies to address teacher absence (whether to discourage it or to maintain the school's proper functioning where it is excessive). They also aimed to understand what teacher absence causes to school management in terms of damages or difficulties. In turn, the interviews with pedagogical coordinators sought to understand, in their opinion, the reasons for teacher absence, and to explore the profile of the teachers who are absent most often, as well as that of consistently present teachers. They were asked about types of obstacles or difficulties that teacher absence brought to pedagogical work. Finally, with regard to the teacher recommended by the coordinator, the interview investigated the reasons that led their peers to be absent and the difficulties that teacher absence brought to the school and, in particular, to their own work. It also explored the reason why the interviewee was seldom/never absent, in order to better understand the reasons for consistent attendance. All interviews followed scripts that were predefined for each professional category and pretested before field work was initiated by the researchers, who received guidance on how to administer them.

The qualitative data obtained through the interviews were submitted to category-based content analysis (Bardin, 2011), in order to identify the themes highlighted by the subjects participating in the study. The data was treated by tabulating the information, which was codified and classified into categories defined *a posteriori* and analyzed, initially, for each professional segment (i.e., principals, pedagogical coordinators, and teachers). Then, the main results obtained for each segment were summarized, identifying aspects in them that showed convergence, divergence, and contradictions. In other words, the systematized data was triangulated, resulting in a summarized illustration of the categories discussed by the education professionals, which will be presented in this article.

It should be stressed that the opinions of the subjects do not reflect the São Paulo municipal school units as a whole, since the research was conducted with a sample of only twenty units. However, the coincident manifestations indicate difficulties that managers and teachers face in their work routines, as well as some conceptions about professional commitment and school organization, which can bring contributions for thinking about absenteeism in the education system as a whole and raising possible strategies to mitigate the problem.

## Presentation and interpretation of results

The descriptive analysis of the database of public servants of Secretaria Municipal de Educação de São Paulo was carried out through a longitudinal study covering from 2009 to 2018, and through a deeper analysis of information about the life of public servants from the department.

This analysis presents the average number of absences<sup>3</sup> and leaves, as well as the average number of days on which the public servant was absent or on leave from work. The information

2 The decision to interview a consistently present teacher is related to the fact that they could provide less biased information about the possible implications of teacher absence for school work and, in particular, for school faculty.

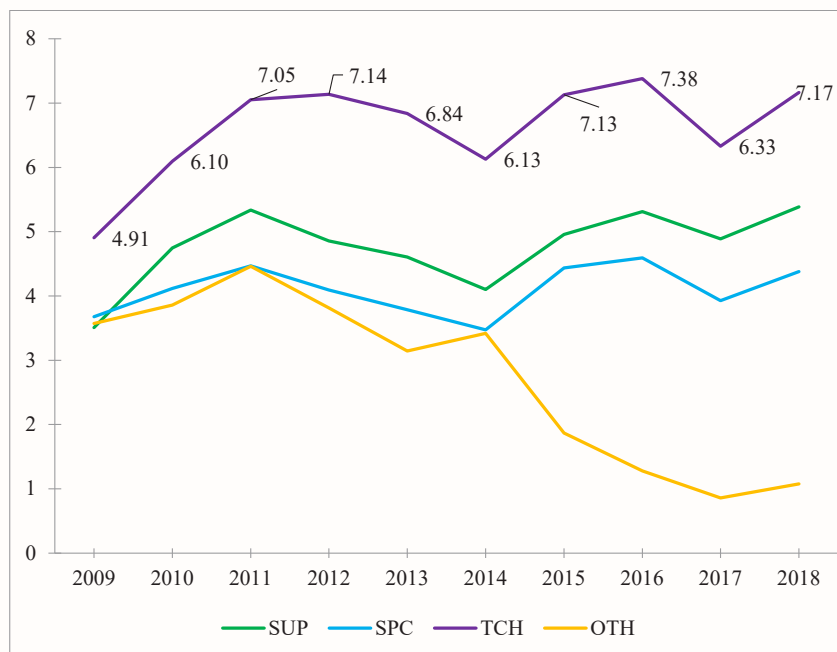
3 Absence should be understood here as the sum of instances of nonattendance and absences of public servants of the Secretaria Municipal de Educação de São Paulo.

is organized by professional category, TCH designating teachers; SPC, specialists (pedagogical coordinators, principals); SUP, support staff (secretaries, student inspectors); and OTH, other workers, such as cleaning and food service staff.

Figure 1 shows a comparison between the four public servant categories and indicates that the average number of absences for public servants in the teacher workforce is the highest. The other figures compare the absences of public servants over time and follow the same record pattern to facilitate identifying data for public servants in the teacher workforce.

**Figure 1**

*Average number of absences per public servant in a year*

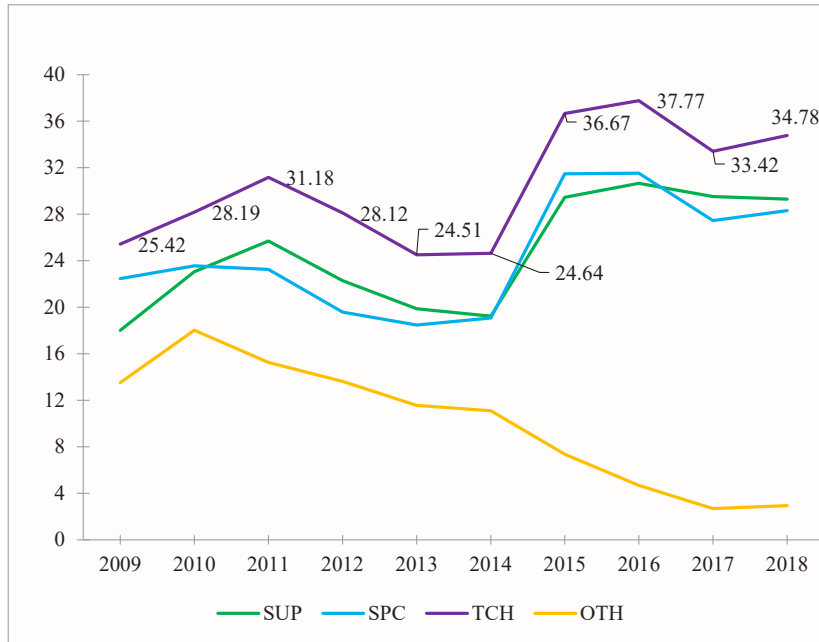


Source: Prepared by the authors, based on data from Ciedu/SMESP.

The average number of absence events per public servant of the TCH type is around 6.6 per year, varying from 4.91 in 2009 to 7.38 in 2016, as shown in Figure 1. It should be noted that the information about the average number of absences highlights the phenomenon's frequency over the years, but does not include the number of days a public servant was off work. Thus, the data was also organized in order indicate the average number of days a public servant was absent during 2018, as presented in Figure 2.



**Figure 2**  
Average number of absence days per public servant in a year

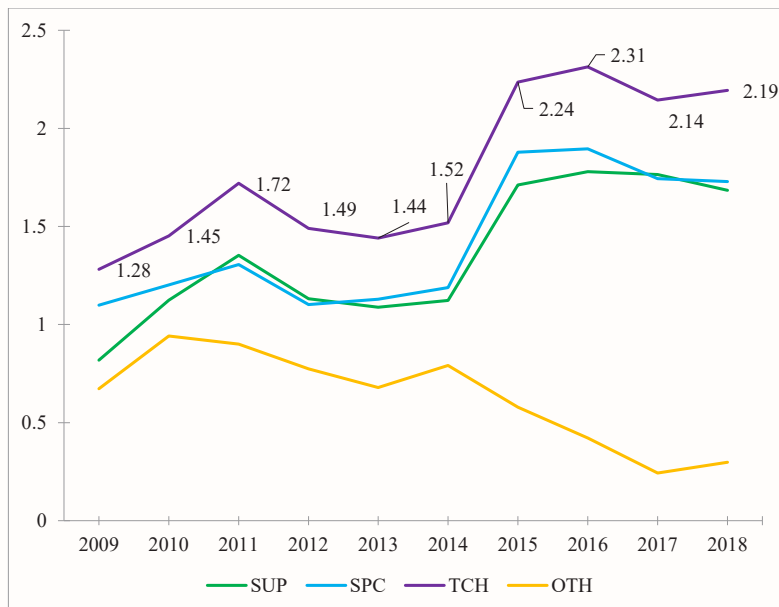


Source: Prepared by the authors, based on data from Ciedu/SMESP.

Considering the average number of absence days per public servant, Figure 2 shows how it is significantly high in relation to the number of events occurred, as indicated in Figure 1. For public servants of the TCH type, it is around 30.5 days per servant per year, varying from 24.51 in 2013 to 37.77 in 2016. This means that, in a school year, TCH-type public servants are off work for approximately one month.

The cases of time off due to leaves indicate that TCH-type public servants also had, over ten years, an average number of leaves greater than those for other municipal public servants (Figure 3).

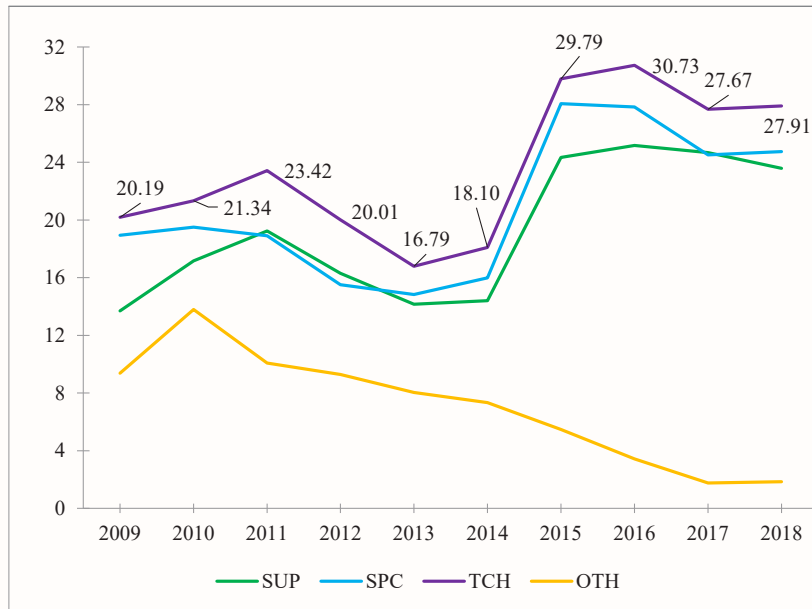
**Figure 3**  
Average number of leaves per public servant in a year



Source: Prepared by the authors, based on data from Ciedu/SMESP.

According to the information in Figure 3, the average number of leaves for a TCH-type public servant is 1.8 leave per year. If the average number of leave days in Figure 4 is considered, TCH-type public servants were off work for around 24 days, the highest number of days compared to the other municipal public servant categories.

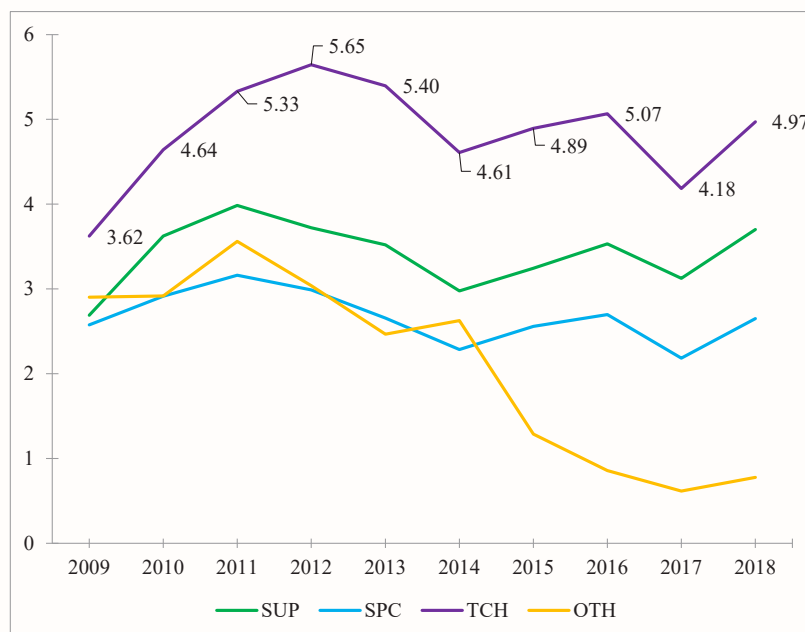
**Figure 4**  
Average number of leave days per public servant in a year



Source: Prepared by the authors, based on data from Ciedu/SMESP.

Considering the absences over the ten years studied, it is possible to note, in Figure 5, that TCH-type public servants had a higher average number of nonattendance instances per public servant than those for the other public servants.

**Figure 5**  
Average number of nonattendance instances per public servant in a year

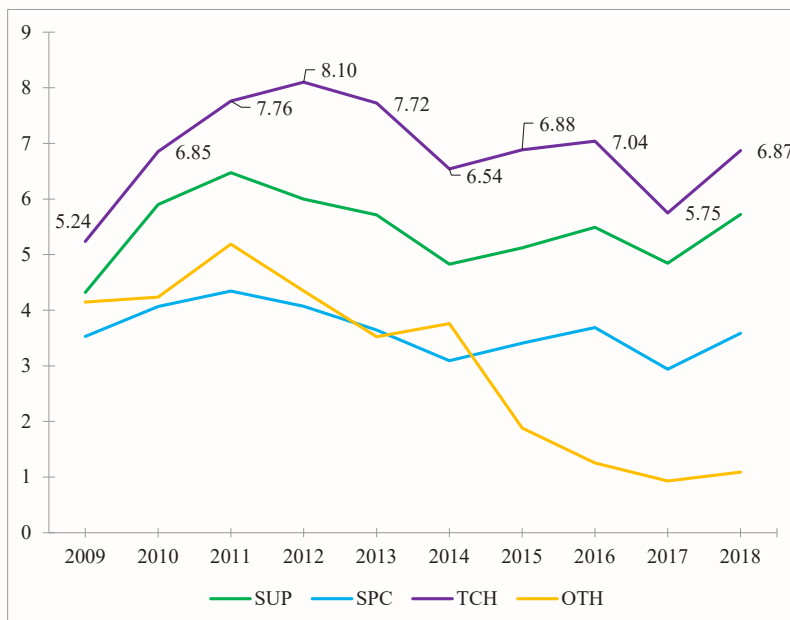


Source: Prepared by the authors, based on data from Ciedu/SMESP.

If the average number of nonattendance instances per TCH-type public servant was around 5 events per year, as shown in Figure 5, the average number of nonattendance days was around 7 per year, varying from 5.24 in 2009 to 8.10 in 2012 (Figure 6).

**Figure 6**

*Average number of nonattendance days per public servant in a year*

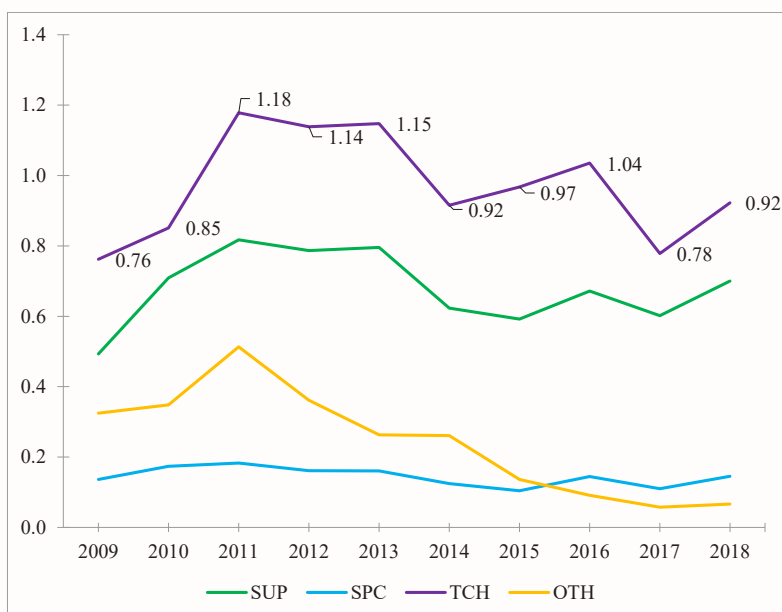


Source: Prepared by the authors, based on data from Ciedu/SMESP.

In summing the average number of absences, excluding paid ones, it is observed that TCH-type public servants have, throughout the ten-year period, a greater number than those for the other municipal servants (Figure 7): the average number of absences (except paid ones) per TCH-type public servant is around 1 per year, having varied from 0.76 in 2009 to 1.18 in 2011. In other words, teachers have more justified and unjustified absences than the other public servants.

**Figure 7**

*Average number of absences (except paid ones) per public servant in a year*



Source: Prepared by the authors, based on data from Ciedu/SMESP.

The descriptive analysis to obtain deeper information specifically about the teacher workforce was conducted after the longitudinal study presented above, by establishing the relationships of number of absences and absence days with profile, career, weekly hours and working conditions variables. Since it is not possible to present all the conducted analyses, the most relevant information is presented below, regarding frequency data that highlights relevant differences between teachers.

Firstly, by relating career length and number of absence events, the following information is obtained, according to Table 1.

**Table 1**

*Teacher career length per individual registration document, until January 1<sup>st</sup>, 2018, according to number of absences*

Career length	Absences									
	None	%	1 to 10	%	11 to 20	%	More than 20	%	Total	%
Less than 5 years	317	16.1	10,788	30.3	2,914	22.5	397	13.0	14,416	26.9
From 5 to 15 years	799	40.7	13,712	38.5	5,489	42.3	1,406	46.1	21,406	39.9
From 15 to 25 years	667	33.9	9,455	26.5	3,988	30.8	1,154	37.9	15,264	28.5
25 years or more	182	9.3	1,679	4.7	578	4.5	90	3.0	2,529	4.7
Total	1,965	100	35,634	100	12,969	100	3,047	100	53,615	100

Source: Prepared by the authors, based on data from Ciedu/SMESP.

Table 1 shows that, in the group of teachers who are never absent, around 40% have a career length from 5 to less than 15 years, and 33.9% have a career length from 15 to less than 25 years. In the group with 1 to 10 absences, 30.3% have a career length of less than 5 years; 38.5%, a career length from 5 to less than 15 years; and 26.5%, from 15 to less than 25 years. Among those with 11 to 20 absences, individuals with a career length from 5 to 25 years stand out, as these concentrate the greatest number of absences. The public servants who are least absent are the teachers with less experience and those about to retire, unlike teachers in mid-career. Some possible explanations for this, but which would require further exploration, lie in the fact that teachers with a career length from 5 to 25 years are in a more troubled stage of their lives, requiring reconciliation between family life and work.

Table 2 shows the relationship between the variable public service employment status and the number of absence events. This status concerns the type of work agreement, and tenured public servants are absent from work more often than those with a non-permanent position. However, the latter overtake the former in the category from 1 to 10 absence events, which can be related to paid absences being legally provided for.

**Table 2**

*Absence of public servants in the teacher workforce according to public service employment status, in 2018*

Status	No absence	%	1 to 10 absences	%	11 to 20 absences	%	Over 20 absences	%	Total	%
Tenured	1,857	3.5	34,882	66.4	12,778	24.3	3,034	5.8	52,551	100
Temporary	87	10.5	598	72.0	137	16.5	8	1.0	830	100
Others	21	9.0	154	65.8	54	23.1	5	2.1	234	100
Total	1,965	3.7	35,634	66.5	12,969	24.2	3,047	5.7	53,615	100

Source: Prepared by the authors, based on data from Ciedu/SMESP.

By associating the information related to municipal teachers' weekly hours and the number of absence events committed in 2018, it is noted, as shown in Table 3, that employees with less than 30 weekly hours and those with 30 weekly hours concentrate their absences around 1 to 10 events, whereas among public servants with over 40 weekly hours, there is a greater proportion of individuals with over 20 absence events per year. This seems to mean that increased weekly hours are a factor conducive to increased absences for public servants from the municipal teacher workforce. Based on data from the interviews conducted with the education professionals, it was possible to explain this phenomenon by means of these teachers' greater exposure to stressful situations and more strenuous working conditions.

**Table 3**

*Weekly hours of public servants from the teacher workforce by number of absences, in 2018*

Weekly hours	No absence	%	1 to 10 absences	%	11 to 20 absences	%	More than 20 absences	%	Total	%
Less than 30 hours	182	3	3,881	70	1,424	26	96	2	5,583	100
30 hours	835	2	25,329	74	7,577	22	393	1	34,134	100
40 hours	2	8	15	60	5	20	3	12	25	100
More than 40 hours	944	7	6,407	46	3,963	29	2,555	18	13,869	100
Total	1,963	4	35,632	67	12,969	24	3,047	6	53,611	100

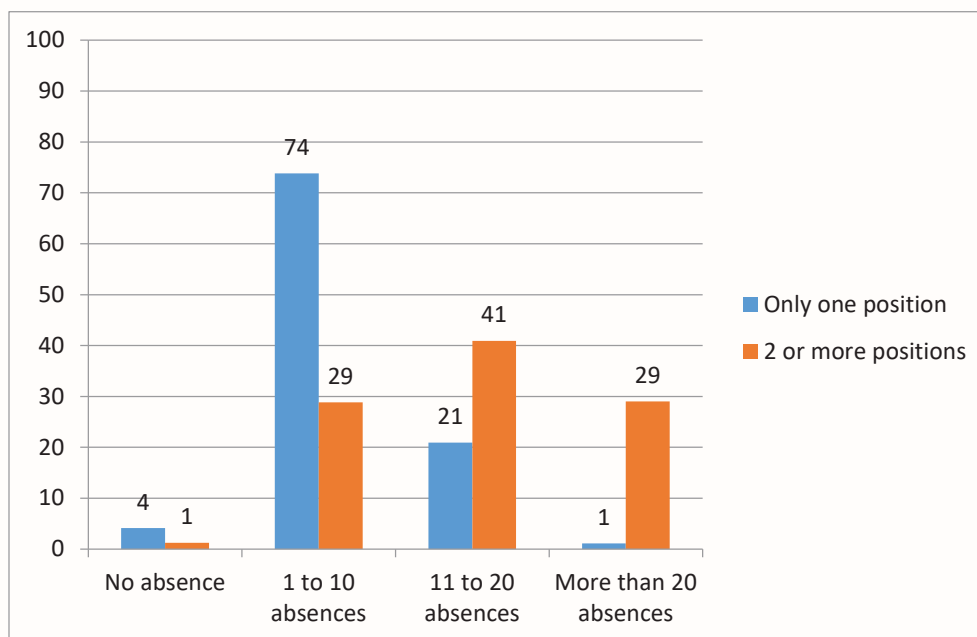
Source: Prepared by the authors, based on data from Ciedu/SMESP.

Figure 8 shows the relationship established between the number of absences and the public servant's position. It was found that teachers holding more than one position tend to concentrate, in terms of number of absences, in the categories "11 to 20 absences" or "more than 20 absences", unlike teachers holding only one position. Thus, the data seems to indicate that the greater the teacher's workload, the greater their tendency to be absent more often.



**Figure 8**

*Proportion of number of absences of public servants from the teacher workforce by amount of positions, in 2018*



Source: Prepared by the authors, based on data from Ciedu/SMESP.

Finally, considering the interviews conducted, working conditions have a major effect on school climate, an aspect pointed out both by teachers and by principals and pedagogical coordinators as an obstacle that discourages teachers' work. As indicated by the participants, poor working conditions are those involving teacher devaluation, an excessive number of students in the classroom, and lack of substitute teachers, support staff and teachers of some disciplines, due to medical leaves and/or unfilled teacher vacancies. These last, in particular, create many problems for schools. Although the participants said that teachers become ill because of the working conditions, stress and tiredness, they feel uncomfortable with this type of leave, inasmuch as medical opinion procedures are slow, and teacher substitution is equally sluggish – in some cases not occurring at all.

As for paid absences, they tend to be considered a teacher right, with some using them even without need. This resort is also used often, due to the relative ease obtaining a medical certificate that justifies the paid absence. Moreover, while school managers try to dialogue and negotiate with teachers to get them not to be absent, they feel powerless to lead some teachers to decrease their number of absences, as legal provisions and rigid administrative procedures immobilize them in this regard.

A remarkable aspect about the results was the discomfort shown in relation to students, mainly on the part of teachers and pedagogical coordinators, as they feel that students are one of the causes of the absences and leaves. Thus, part of the responsibility for teacher absence was imputed to students, due to indiscipline, violence, impoliteness, and social vulnerability, as well as a lack of support from their families.

In general, in the accounts collected at the schools, four central themes/categories were identified:

1. reasons for teacher absence and its possible consequences;
2. damage caused by teacher absence to school management;
3. school organization procedures and strategies due to teacher absence;
4. aspects that could be changed in relation to the current scenario of teacher absence, from the perspective of the research participants.

## Reasons for teacher absence and its possible consequences

Overall, in the subjects' responses, it is worth noting their view that teachers' working conditions are one of the main factors causing teacher absence. These conditions involve, besides wage issues, others related to career plan, accumulation of positions, shortage of teachers to substitute absentees, and the relationship with students, which seems to be very difficult due to the number of students in the classroom, their indiscipline and lack of interest in studies, in addition to their high social vulnerability. In most cases, the health problems were associated with poor working conditions, a predominant perspective in these workers' narrative. In the respondents' view, it is not uncommon for teachers' illness to be associated with "tiredness" or "stress". In the words of a principal:

*Teachers are absent because they become ill. We have a large number of people with depression, anxiety crisis, not only in education. This has been interfering. We have crowded classrooms and I believe that helps worsen cases, because it's extremely difficult to work like this.*

At times, this situation results from the accumulation of positions by teachers, which implies work overload and, not rarely, illness. In the case of paid absences, it was recognized that teachers have this legal resource, which is to be absent without damage to their professional career. Some coordinators also corroborated this aspect when they stressed that "*it is understood, in the system, that absence is a right*" and that the legislation is poor with regard to addressing this practice.

## Damage caused by teacher absence to school management

Obviously, teacher absence has effects on school management and routine. But this is further worsened when the school has no means to substitute absentees, whether due to insufficient supply of modular teachers (who, not infrequently, have been allegedly substituting teachers on long leaves) or due to difficulty finding substitutes at the last minute, i.e., unexpectedly and without forecast.

Generally, the research participants said that absences, particularly without notice, harm the school's organization routine with regard to teachers' planning, the shifting of staff from other roles to teaching or "taking care of" students, service delays for those who substitute absent teachers, and even schedule changes in school food services, with consequences for school cleanliness.

As for the problems that teacher absence causes to students and their education process, contrary to expectations, few principals highlighted this issue. Those who did mention it said that the absent teacher:

*Causes harm to students in planned activities. It requires the substitute teacher to plan the class so that students perceive that the class continues to be relevant. It also causes indiscipline, as students keep testing the substitute teacher. (Principal).*

*It leads to a decrease in student performance, due to increased indiscipline, because they don't want another teacher, and begin to come up with actions to get in the way. Indiscipline, then, is a manifestation of resistance. (Principal).*

*For students, it's a huge loss, because it hampers the sequence, especially in cases where you can't find a replacement for teachers on leave. I believe this is one of the main hindrances in public school. (Principal).*

## School organization procedures and strategies due to teacher absence

In general, the organization and management of school units regarding absences seems to have as assumptions – or as a general course of action – constant "dialoguing" and "negotiating"

with teachers, especially with those with excessive absences, excluding absences for medical leave. One principal said, for example, that it would be necessary to “*treat the cases in an individualized manner*”, without “*punishing teachers who are facing severe personal problems*”. In another account, a principal considered it necessary:

*To work on convincing. To recognize the importance of the teacher role, and for the teacher to be here. The legislation allows them to make appointments. There is no limit to that. There are also the TRE<sup>4</sup> days off, which public servants can have when they have worked for that body, for example, when they’ve worked in elections. Suppose that I have a colleague on medical leave, and I don’t have a teacher to take her place. How can I hold on to that TRE day off of mine? Can I hold on to that paid absence? It’s with this purpose. But legally, there is that possibility, yes.*

This perspective is corroborated by the pedagogical coordinators, who add to this dialogue the need to “*promote reflection, raise teachers’ awareness about the implications of absences for the school and for students’ learning*”.

Despite the difficulty preventing leaves and most types of legally permitted absences, the universe of the studied schools seem to be pervaded by strategies aimed directly at paid absence, which is dependent on the principal’s approval. In these terms, schools often adopt the criterion of granting a certain number of paid absences per period (usually just two), depending on the size of the teacher group and the number of active classrooms.

Once a teacher’s absence is confirmed, different procedures are adopted. Dismissing students when the teacher is absent and the class cannot be replaced is a measure that has been usually avoided. Thus, in extreme cases, palliative measures are adopted, such as dividing and distributing students from a particular class without a teacher between the other classes, even of different grades, particularly in smaller schools. This situation was a reason of complaints both by the teachers and the coordinators, who said that they had to reorganize their plans for the day or take on tasks they were not responsible for.

### **What could be changed in relation to the current scenario of teacher absence from the perspective of the research respondents**

For most respondents, the changes that should be made to change the current scenario of teacher absences are mainly related to:

- **Better working conditions:** less students per class; actions to combat indiscipline and the lack of interest in studies; hiring more teachers.
- **Valuing teachers:** improving teacher career and wage, in order to avoid accumulation of positions; investments in continuing education and in consistently present teachers; support for projects requested by teachers.
- **Better actions for teacher health:** improving the municipality’s Health Department; inspecting and revising long medical leaves; providing appointment hours that do not conflict with the public servant’s work hours.
- And finally, with less mentions, **revising the legislation** on teacher absence so as to set new parameters for it.

4 Translation note: TRE is the acronym for Tribunal Regional Eleitoral, or Regional Electoral Court.

## Final considerations

Based on the participants' perceptions about the phenomenon of absenteeism, it is possible to affirm that changes in human resources policies and actions that affect school routine are factors to be considered in explaining a phenomenon that is markedly multifactorial. Medical leaves create problems for schools, and while the workers denounce that teachers become ill because of the working conditions, stress and tiredness, they are also uncomfortable with these leaves, inasmuch as medical opinion procedures take too long and teacher substitution is slow or does not happen at all. About paid absences, they are treated as a teacher right, and even without necessity, participants said that there are teachers who use them. It was also highlighted that is relatively easy to obtain a medical certificate that justifies a paid absence. Even the managers feel powerless and without legal resources to reduce the number of teacher absences, as administrative procedures are rigid and immobilizing, leaving them no option but to dialogue and try to negotiate with the teacher to prevent them from being absent.

The teachers and coordinators reported that they feel deeply embarrassed and uncomfortable with the fact that students are pointed out as one of the "causes", according to some teachers, of their absences and leaves. This discourse does end up imputing to students and their families part of the responsibility for teacher absence, which supposedly results from students' indiscipline, impoliteness and social vulnerability, as well as a lack of support from their families with regard to the school and teachers. In addition, the education professionals' perception about the working conditions as a factor linked to absenteeism confirms conclusions pointed out by the consulted literature, as well as the presence of stressors, which result in illness.

The studied bibliography indicated that teacher absences seem to be part of a school culture (Santos, 2006). In this study, the identification of paid absences as a teacher right is in line with the idea that nonattendance constitutes an aspect of a school culture, which means that the nonattendance behavior has become an institutional attitude, reinforced by teachers' (distorted) notion about the legitimacy of being absent from work.

It is therefore urgent and necessary, for securing the right to quality public education, that initial and continuing teacher education courses constantly underscore how important teachers' presence in school is, how fundamental it is for ensuring that students learn according to the curriculum and have successful academic paths. Thus, the victims of the disorganization caused by teachers' absence from classrooms – public school students and their families – should not be blamed for this problem.

In addition, it is equally central to work with the meanings that teachers assign to their work contract, since there is controversy about the fact that paid absences are configured as a "right to nonattendance" for this professional category. If there is such a representation, it possibly results from public policies that, in the past, in an attempt to ease teachers' work, ended up creating many difficulties for those who are systematically at school and for the development of a pedagogical project that is consistent and focused on the teaching and learning processes.

In these terms, overcoming the phenomenon of teacher absenteeism seems to require investment in various fronts of public action, in the attempt to: (a) improve teachers' working conditions in order to prevent the excessive tiredness, stress and illness that affect them, especially by reducing the number of students per classroom, not authorizing accumulation of positions, making salary improvements and investing in the teacher career; (b) change the beliefs that teachers seem to have about their responsibilities and rights; (c) speed up the inspection of medical leaves and enhance health services for the teacher workforce; and finally, once the above are fulfilled, (d) improve the legislation, which is currently permissive about the number of absences each teacher

can have without harm to their career and salary, and poor in terms of measures capable of curbing teacher absenteeism. By no means is this a matter of punishing the teacher, but rather triggering a series of measures which, combined, can contribute to mitigating absenteeism, furthering an expansion of the right to quality education, in a well-managed school, with teachers who are satisfied with teaching and therefore consistently present, aware of the importance of their educational and social role.

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### Note on authorship

Fabiana Silva Fernandes and Claudia Davis were responsible for planning, organizing and writing the text. Cláudia Oliveira Pimenta collaborated in elaborating and reviewing the article. Adriano Moro and Vandrê Gomes da Silva reviewed the text.

### Data availability statement

The data underlying the research text are provided in the article.

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