



## COMMITTEE OF THE WHOLE (PUBLIC)

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Report No. 19-022

### Employee Well-being & Absenteeism

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#### PURPOSE:

1. To provide Committee of the Whole with an update on employee absenteeism due to sick leave, identify contributing factors, reviewing current efforts to promote wellness and responding to identified attendance barriers.

#### CONTEXT:

2. Increasing employee absenteeism due to sick leave has been a concern for the last several years. This report will provide an update on sick leave usage, as well as identify potential factors that may be contributing to the increase in sick leave usage and long term disability claims. The report will also provide information on efforts that are currently underway and ongoing to address absenteeism, including the District's Attendance Support Program and initiatives to address contributing organizational factors.

Staff and student well-being have been explicitly identified as organizational priorities within the District's current strategic plan. Employee well-being refers to the physical, mental and social aspects of an individual's overall health. Developing effective employer programs to promote employee well-being requires an understanding of how both organizational factors such as workload, work environment, and personal factors, such as lifestyle habits, can impact on employee wellness. The benefits of investing time and resources in initiatives that support and promote employee well-being can include a reduction in absenteeism related to ill-health and/or low morale; enhanced levels of staff productivity and performance; a positive impact on the organization's ability to attract and retain top talent across all employee groups in the District; and, enhancing the learning environment for students. Although personal wellness is

ultimately an individual responsibility, the employer also has a responsibility to ensure that the workplace is not adversely impacting on employees' well-being by providing a physically and psychologically healthy and safe workplace.

## KEY CONSIDERATIONS:

### 3. Sick Leave Usage

Although there are a number of reasons for investing time and resources in this area, a key driver has been the increase in sick leave usage among District employees over the last five years. Sick leave usage has increased by approximately 32% over the last five years, to an average of approximately 12 days in 2017-2018, an increase of more than one day from the previous year, or more than 10% year over year.

#### Average Sick Leave Usage (2013-14 to 2017-18)

| YEARS                      | 2013/2014 | 2014/2015 | 2015/2016 | 2016/2017 | 2017/2018 |
|----------------------------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|
| Elementary Teachers        | 8.44      | 9.22      | 10.23     | 11.12     | 12.03     |
| Secondary Teachers         | 7.50      | 8.27      | 8.79      | 8.37      | 9.86      |
| Educational Assistant's    | 12.20     | 12.40     | 13.91     | 15.76     | 16.10     |
| Early Childhood Educator's | 8.45      | 10.42     | 11.48     | 14.41     | 15.65     |
| Custodians/Maintenance     | 12.75     | 11.11     | 14.63     | 14.48     | 17.45     |
| Others                     | 6.20      | 6.80      | 6.63      |           |           |
| Others – Union             |           |           |           | 8.65      | 9.43      |
| Others – Non-Union         |           |           |           | 5.87      | 5.15      |
| All Employees              | 8.61      | 9.16      | 10.16     | 10.87     | 12.00     |

#### SBCI Absence Study Report 2013-2014 to 2017-18

The increase in sick leave is a cause of concern for a number of reasons, including the impact on organizational effectiveness and the associated financial costs. The financial costs include the direct salary costs paid to absent employees, as well as the replacement costs for casual replacements given the large number of District staff who need to be replaced when they are absent from work. The latest estimate suggests that the annual financial cost associated with sick leave exceeds \$29 million in direct salary costs, which does not include the significant cost of replacement employees. For 2018-2019, the cost of supply teachers is expected to reach almost \$20 million.

Absenteeism also has a potential adverse impact on the organization's effectiveness. Frequent absences among teachers and other front-line supports is disruptive to the classroom environment and can adversely impact student learning and well-being, and that of other staff in the building.

The OCDSB, like many other districts in the province, has been experiencing increasing difficulty ensuring there are sufficient casual employees available, including occasional teachers, casual Early Childhood Educators (ECEs) and casual Educational Assistants (EAs), to replace behind absent employees and the number of unfilled assignments continues to be a problem on a regular basis. The problem is particularly challenging with regard to filling behind absence ECEs and EAs. In order to ensure a class or assignment is covered, principals or vice-principals may provide coverage themselves, taking them away from their own responsibilities. They may also ask other teachers to give up their preparation time, which then must be paid back at a later date or shuffle EA assignments within the school for the day, or use emergency replacements. The difficulty filling behind absent employees has led the District to significantly limit release time for other purposes such as in school and system level professional development. The issue has increased stress on other staff in the schools, and in particular elementary principals and vice-principals, who are required to spend more and more of their time trying to find replacements, or, dealing with the fall-out of not being able to find a replacement through the usual channels.

Human Resources, in consultation with senior staff and school administrators, are continuing to explore strategies to reduce the number of unfilled absences, including on-going recruitment for casual employees, making adjustments to the call-out system, and assigning daily occasional teachers to work every day in a particular school or schools as Designated Occasional Teachers (DOT's). In some cases, more permanent changes to terms and conditions of casual employment may be required to make the work more attractive, and the OCDSB more competitive relative to neighbouring school boards and other employers. These issues will be examined more closely through the bargaining process.

#### 4. Potential Contributing Factors to Absenteeism

While it is difficult to pinpoint with exact certainty the reasons why sick leave has increased so dramatically in the last few years, several contributing factors have been identified as potential reasons by various parties.

The increase in absenteeism at the current rate can, at least in part, be traced to the changes to the sick leave program, introduced in 2012 by the Liberal government as part of the controversial *Putting Students First Act*. Introduced to control costs, the revised sick leave plan, in its original form, more closely resembled the sick leave and short term disability plans available to other public sector employees in Ontario, by reducing the number of sick leave days available annually, removing the ability to accumulate unused days from year to year, and introducing a short-term disability plan to bridge employees with a serious illness to long term disability. The current sick leave program, which has been revised from the original plan introduced in 2012, provides up to 131 days of sick leave (11 days at 100% pay and 120 days at 90%) annually.

In addition to the sick leave plan design, it is equally important to look at workplace factors that might impact employee well-being and contribute to increased sick leave usage. A general increase in mental health related absenteeism has been identified as a major concern among employers generally. One in five Canadians will experience a mental health issue or addiction problem

at some point in their lifetime and mental and behavioural health issues have become the main causes of short and long-term disability leaves from the workplace in Canada. Although specific data isn't available, anecdotal information suggests this pattern is at least consistent with short and long-term leaves in the education sector.

In general, and as noted frequently by trustees, teachers and other education workers are faced with increasingly challenging work, both in terms of its complexity and the expectations. The provincial unions representing school board employees and OCDSB union representatives have identified several workplace factors as having the highest adverse impact on employee wellness, and, therefore, contributing to the increase in sick leave. These include an increase in aggressive behaviours in the classroom; lack of consistency in student discipline; erosion of professional judgment and professional autonomy; and increased workload demands and general expectations on members.

One of the concerns that has received a lot of attention provincially is the increase in aggressive behaviours among students as reported by front-line education workers. A provincial working group was established through the last round of collective bargaining and continues to meet to discuss concerns and identify feasible strategies. At the District level, there is a workplace violence policy and program in place which includes an on-line reporting mechanism for staff to report incidents of aggressive behaviour or violence as defined in the *Occupational Health and Safety Act* as actual physical contact, attempted physical contact or threats of physical contact. Within the OCDSB, there has been an increase in the number of reported incidents involving aggressive behaviours directed at staff. These incidents can certainly impact the well-being of the staff involved and lead to absences either as a result of an injury or stress.

#### 5. Current Strategies

In response to increasing absenteeism, a comprehensive and multi-faceted approach to promoting healthy and engaging workplaces is required. With respect to the sick leave plan design, since the plans are part of the terms and conditions of employment set out in the collective agreements and applicable handbooks, any changes would need to occur through the appropriate bargaining process. However, as noted above, addressing issues related to employee absenteeism and wellness issues in general, goes beyond the design of the sick leave plan. A comprehensive approach means having programs in place, such as an attendance support program and disability management program, as well as programs that are proactive and prevention oriented.

The District has an attendance management program in place to identify and support employees with recurring (non-culpable) absences. The Disability Management Program includes early intervention and return to work strategies with some aspects of an employee wellness program. An update on each of these programs, including successes, challenges and opportunities is provided below.

a) Attendance Support Program

The District has had an attendance program in one form or another in place for many years. In the spring of 2016, in response to increasing absenteeism and evidence that more centralized support was needed, a proposal was approved for additional resources to be invested in the area of attendance support. This included hiring a full-time employee within the Human Resources department dedicated to the administration of the Attendance Support Program. The program was relaunched in the fall of 2016, based on experiences and feedback from Human Resources staff, supervisors, federation/union representatives, and employees. In addition, the School Boards' Cooperative Inc. (SBCI), was engaged to conduct a gap analysis of the District's attendance support program against fourteen best practice elements. Overall, the review provided some areas that needed to be addressed, but confirmed that the District's program is sound.

Under the current Attendance Support Program employees who have 11 or more intermittent sick days (i.e. not attributable to a single long-term medical issue) are identified, enrolled in the program and provided with appropriate supports and ongoing monitoring to encourage improved attendance. The program focuses on non-culpable or innocent absenteeism and is designed to be supportive and non-disciplinary in nature.

Between 1 September 2017 and 31 August 2018, approximately 25% of the District's workforce were absent for 11 days or more on sick leave. Of this number, approximately 90% were referred to, or were already being managed by Disability Management based on medical support. Since 1 September 2018, approximately 360 employees had met the threshold of 11 days of sick leave, and of that number, 33 employees were determined to meet the criteria for enrolment in the Attendance Support Program.

Although there are advantages to assigning the implementation of the program to a single position, including consistency of implementation, it also presents challenges in terms of being able to manage all eligible cases. The most effective attendance support programs rely on individual supervisors/managers to implement the program, at least through the initial stages, that is, through early identification of the pattern of absenteeism; early intervention through an informal support focused conversation that seeks to identify ways in which the employer can support improved attendance, reinforcing the importance of regular attendance, discussing the impact of frequent absenteeism and establishing achievable targets for improving attendance. Later stages, following a period of continued frequent absences, would involve Human Resources support and increasing levels of intervention. This is a longer term goal, which includes building capacity among current supervisors in this area.

In general, there has been relatively positive feedback regarding the program from principals, managers, employees, and the union/federation



representatives. In addition to the challenges associated with the caseload, accessing and manipulating the absence data from the District's Human Resources Information System (HRIS) system remains difficult.

b) Disability & WSIB Management

As part of the District's disability management program, employees who are absent on sick leave for five consecutive days are required to provide a completed medical certificate to support their absence. In 2017-2018, the number of cases being managed through the Disability Management Program continued to climb. Through the budget, two additional positions were provided to the Employee Wellness and Disability Management division beginning 1 September 2017. Early feedback from employees and unions has confirmed that the positions have increased capacity within the division to support absent employees and has had a positive impact in terms of early intervention and return to work for both occupational and non-occupational illness and injury including planning and implementing accommodations. It is well-established that early intervention efforts along with identifying and providing the appropriate accommodations, are critical to promoting early and effective return to work.

Identifying trends, for example, with respect to the reasons employees are off on longer terms leaves, helps to focus preventative strategies and interventions to reduce the frequency and/or duration of these leaves. Mental health and musculoskeletal disorders continue to be leading causes for long term disability. As a result, employee mental health, including identifying organizational factors that may be contributing to mental ill health among employees, remains a priority of the District's wellness programs, as outlined below.

c) Employee Wellness Program

While the attendance support and disability management programs are important early intervention and absence management strategies, an effective employee wellness program should also include health promotion and prevention strategies and strive to mitigate or remove barriers that may impede or adversely impact employees' health. At their most basic, employee wellness programs generally include initiatives to promote positive health outcomes in order to reduce health related absences and increase productivity. The OCDSB has had various initiatives in place to support wellness for a number of years, such as the Employee and Family Assistance Program, which is currently offered through a contract with Morneau Shepell, and the Short-term Emergency Childcare service, operated by Andrew Fleck. Over the years, other initiatives have been introduced, subject to available resources, such as making funds available to schools and departments to support site-based wellness initiatives, arrangements for corporate membership pricing at local gyms and other health related providers, and District-wide health promotion campaigns. More recently, the wellness budget has been used to support Workplace Mental Health Leadership certificate program, for principals and supervisors (see below). The Employee Wellness area on the District's

website also provides information and resources for staff to promote their personal health and well-being.

Supporting employee wellness is a District-wide responsibility that extends beyond Human Resources and Employee Wellness and Disability Management. It is increasingly becoming a lens through which the work of other departments are viewed. Although largely focused on promoting positive mental health for students, the work being undertaken as part of the District's mental health strategy includes strategies for promoting positive mental health for staff. For example, professional learning modules on increasing resiliency in students include content on developing staff resilience as well.

Work is also being undertaken in the area of compassion fatigue, specifically related to staff who work directly with the District's highest needs students, or whose work is related to supporting other staff. Similarly, the support provided following a traumatic event in a school through the Traumatic Events Response Team (TERT) includes supporting students and staff on site and in the moment.

During the 2017-2018 school year, one of the areas of focus for professional learning was on promoting positive student behaviours. This was prioritized in response to qualitative feedback from the unions and principals and vice-principals related to the need for additional supports to promote positive student behaviour and respond appropriately to situations involving escalating and/or aggressive behaviours. As in other districts in the province, the number of aggressive incidents reported within the OCDSB has increased steadily in recent years, particularly in the primary division and specialized program classes. As a result, promoting positive student behaviour, including strategies related to development self-regulation and resiliency and collaborative problem solving strategies, has been the focus of several professional learning opportunities for principals and vice-principals.

Staff is committed to increasing efforts directed at promoting a healthy workplace, fostering employee wellness and mitigating factors identified as having a negative impact on employee health and well-being. These initiatives include the following:

- I. Healthy and Engaging Workplace Committee  
A Healthy and Engaging Workplace Committee was established last year for purposes of supporting the District's employee well-being and engagement initiatives. The committee includes representation from all employee groups, and relevant central departments. The inaugural meeting was held on 18 December 2017. The committee's mandate includes identifying ways to promote engaging and health workplaces across the District, making recommendations to Director's Executive Council with regard to specific wellness initiatives and guiding the

implementation of the Psychological Health and Safety in the Workplace standard.

II. Workplace Mental Health Leadership Certificate Program

As indicated above, training sessions have been made available for principals and managers. To date, over 100 participants have completed the training, and another session is planned for this year. Senior staff is committed to providing the training to all supervisors in the district. Feedback from participants has been very positive, and in particular, the 'observe', 'plan', 'act', 'reflect' model used to help guide their responses to potential signs of mental illness or mental health concerns with an employee, and the importance of early intervention and supports. Additional training is scheduled later this spring. Plans are underway to assess the impact of the training, if any, on how principals, managers and supervisors approach their roles as leaders in dealing with potential mental health issues.

III. Psychological Health & Safety in the Workplace Standard (CSAZ1003)

The Psychological Health & Safety in the Workplace Standard (the standard), was commissioned by the Mental Health Commission of Canada and launched in January 2013 as a voluntary standard for Canadian workplaces. The standard provides a comprehensive framework for implementation, along with tools and resources to guide organizations in promoting mental health and preventing psychological harm at work. The standard identifies 13 workplace factors that impact psychological health and well-being, such as reward and recognition, work/life balance, workload management, civility and respect and engagement. Implementation of the standard requires employers to examine their workplace against these factors to identify things associated with the work or the workplace that may be adversely impacting on employees' mental health.

6. Ongoing Challenges and Summary

There continues to be a number of challenges to reducing staff absenteeism. For example, recent vacancies within the Employee Wellness and Disability Management division have impacted some wellness initiatives, but recent hiring should allow things to move forward. Other changes, such as reviewing the current sick leave plan design, can only be achieved through collective bargaining. Other challenges may require a more significant shift in our approach to work and the workplace.

In summary, staff believes that promoting a healthy workplace is an organizational imperative that warrants the ongoing investment of time and resources. Employee absenteeism due to sick leave continues to rise year-over-year. As work to curtail the current trend in this area continues, it will be



important to continue to engage collaboratively with representatives from Ottawa Secondary School Teachers' Federation (OSSTF), Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario (ETFO), Ontario Principals' Council (OPC) Bytown and other employees to plan, develop and implement programs and initiatives that will support and promote employee engagement and personal well-being, and mitigate to the extent reasonably possible any negative workplace factors.

### **RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS:**

7. The current budget provides approximately \$35,000 to support initiatives to promote healthy and engaging workplaces, for example, the Mental Health Leadership certification program for principals and managers. Human Resources is in the process of identifying potential resource needs for next year in time for consideration as part of next year's budget.

### **STRATEGIC LINKS:**

8. Staff well-being is explicitly identified as a priority within the District's current strategic plan, and is critical to supporting overall organizational effectiveness.

### **GUIDING QUESTIONS:**

9. The following guiding questions are provided to assist with the discussion:
  - 1) How effective are current programs in reducing absenteeism, promoting well-being and engagement, and promoting the District as an employer of choice for purposes of recruiting and retaining talent?
  - 2) What other opportunities are there to enhance current well-being and engagement programs and initiatives?
  - 3) What are the greatest challenges to promoting a healthy and engaging workplace and what will it take to overcome them?

### **FOR DISCUSSION**

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