

Substitutes

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divide classes and put students into other rooms of the same grade, increasing class sizes.

And sometimes they pull teachers from their prep hour to cover a class that otherwise would have no teacher — regardless of whether they teach that subject.

Michele Claassen, a special education teacher at Sauk Rapids-Rice Middle School, said she has covered everything from special education to industrial technology during her prep time.

As a former substitute and now full-time teacher, Claassen knows the struggles caused by the substitute shortage. And it's only getting worse.

Fewer teachers, low unemployment amplify sub shortage

"The need is not going away but the individuals (needed) to address that need — qualified teachers — is diminishing."

— Al Sowers
Teachers On Call vice president and practice leader

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Over the last decade, the number of people becoming teachers has declined significantly.

"I would say the most notable decline, especially within the teaching profession ... (was) the mid to late 2000s," Sower said.



Sowers

Sowers is vice president and practice leader of Teachers On Call, which services schools in Minnesota and Wisconsin. In Central Minnesota, Teachers On Call provides substitute teachers to St. Cloud, Sartell-St. Stephen and ROCORI districts.

The shortage stems from fewer people entering the career and more teachers leaving the field while student population grows, according to Sower.

"We're seeing this challenge across the nation," he said. He noted there are more than 100,000 vacancies nationally in teaching.

How does this translate into the shortage of subs?



Kindergartners gather around Samantha Backer as she reads a book on Jan. 25 at Talahi Community School in St. Cloud.
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"Directly," Sowers said.

A teacher supply-and-demand report from the Minnesota Professional Educator Licensing Standards Board released in late January found more than half of licensed teachers are not working as a teacher in a public school in Minnesota.

Of about 134,000 licensed teachers, fewer than 64,000 are actively teaching. The report doesn't point to one reason why, but Sower chalks it up to stress of the job and wages that don't keep up with other professions.

The report also revealed about 47 percent of Minnesota districts called the shortage of short-call substitutes a "serious problem." Only about 7 percent said the shortage was not a problem.

More so, about 44 percent of districts said there are "significantly fewer" subs now compared to five years ago.

Short-call subs are eligible to fill in for the same teacher for only 15 consecutive

days per state law.

"We have the same problem everyone else in the state has," said Tracy Bowe, executive director of human resources for St. Cloud school district. "There is a shortage of substitute teachers, and I think we're all watching that get worse as the unemployment numbers dip and there's all sorts of opportunities for people to do other things."

To complicate matters, districts in Central Minnesota are all trying to pull subs from the same pool of candidates, but some are finding more success than others.

Demand far outweighs supply

The amount of teachers districts find to step in compared to the amount

they need varies daily and is largely left to the luck of the draw. Most days this means 85 to 90 percent of classrooms get a sub. But for others, it can be less than half of the classrooms.

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Sartell sees the highest substitute fill rates of the St. Cloud metro. In December, 95 percent of the open substitute positions were filled by staff through Teachers On Call. On average, Sartell's fill rate is about 90 percent, according to Sowers.

"I think a lot of districts have gone to vending out those sub services — where we all used to run our own — because it's such a dynamic workforce issue right now," Bowe said.

Sowers said districts typically see an increase of 10 to 15 percent in fill rates after switching to Teachers On Call.

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