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But even when subs feel well-prepared, the shortage is creating work quality concerns for teachers — and even inciting animosity among teachers.

Manifestation of teacher guilt, blame

“I had to be gone — my dog died and so it was a morning-of-type thing — and they couldn’t find a sub. I had five different people throughout the day, and I had all my plans ready so they knew what they were doing. But even still, it’s the kids when coming back saying, ‘Why were you gone?’”

— Michele Claassen
Sauk Rapids-Rice Middle School
special education teacher

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For Claassen, taking a day off work feels wrong — even if it’s for something as personal and understandable as mourning the loss of a loved one.

“That’s the downside of having this shortage and not having enough people who want to do this,” she said. “Is that you feel guilty because you’re taking time off, when you shouldn’t.”

She’s not alone in her reaction. Some teachers who feel an obligation to their students worry how their absence will affect kids. So despite having sick and discretionary days built into their contracts, teachers aren’t taking them.

White said from the beginning of the school year to Jan. 15, teachers in Sauk Rapids-Rice on average have only taken 3.6 of their 13 available days off.

“So they’re halfway but we’re not showing that that’s the amount,” she said.

Of those days taken off, White said about half have been because of sickness and the other half were discretionary days. Compared to last year, teachers are now taking off almost one full day less.

“I hear that a lot: I would rather come (to work sick) than leave my kids to chance,” she said.

St. Cloud sees similar teacher absence numbers.

“Our teachers are very dedicated human beings. They worry about their kids and they worry about the achievement,” Bowe said. “Almost half of (the absences) are illness — either themselves or they are taking care of kids or family



Samantha Backer goes through a book with kindergarten students on Jan. 25 at Talahi Community School in St. Cloud. DAVE SCHWARZ, DSCHWARZ@STCLOUDTIMES.COM



Erickson

members that are sick.”
The other half of teacher absences are split between discretionary use and district business such as professional development, according to Bowe.

But the stress of the situation isn’t just introspective — it’s also brewing bad blood between fellow teachers.

“It also just starts pitting some teachers against each other in some ways,” said Chris Erickson, president of the St. Cloud Education Association. “If some-

one is gone for whatever reason — you got a sick kid — you know, it’s ‘How dare you be gone? Because now we have no one to cover for it.’”

Erickson also said the shortage has come up during negotiations.

“It does create concerns for teachers,” Bowe said. “We’re really looking at that as a work life quality issue because it really creates stress.”

Students lose out on learning

“I hear that a lot: ‘I don’t do subs.’ I’ve had students who would just be

Substitute teacher training Feb. 19-20

Resource Training & Solutions in Sartell has a two-day substitute teacher training Feb. 19-20 for people to become certified short-call substitute teachers.

The program is for those who have a four-year bachelor’s degree and want to teach but don’t have the full credentials.

For more information or to register, contact Kate Reichert at 320-255-3236, ext. 324 or visit www.resourcetraining.com.

like, ‘Nope, I don’t do that’ and they go to the resource room or they go to an alternative classroom for the day, because they just can’t handle that different person in their room.”

— Michele Claassen
Sauk Rapids-Rice Middle School
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Claassen said her 13 years of experience as a substitute gave her perspective on how that disruption of routine can impact students. While she speaks pointedly to the experiences of special education students, the sentiment is universal: Having a sub in the room is a change students notice, and having no sub at all is even worse.

Research over the last decade has linked chronic teacher absenteeism (10 or more days absent) to negative impacts on student achievement.

While no one is advocating that teachers shouldn’t be allowed to take sick or discretionary days as negotiated in their contracts, most educators agree the substitute shortage is only making the problem worse.

“You’re going to have some lost time of instruction,” Claassen said.

For the teaching field — which is already seeing a steep decline in numbers — the sub shortage is only exacerbating underlying issues.

“It’s making it hard just to do our job,” Erickson said.

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