

Vacant positions often reason for subs in Polk

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The Ledger

Published: Saturday, May 28, 2016 at 8:11 p.m.



With teachers contending with high stress levels and rampant "crumbsnatcher cooties," sick days are an expected cause of teacher absences.

In Polk, where teachers missed an average of seven days in 2014-15, sick leave is the most common reason a substitute is called, making up 32 percent of all teacher absences last school year, according to data from Kelly

Educational Staffing, which hires and manages substitutes for the Polk County School District.

But the second most common reason a substitute is called is to fill vacant positions. According to calculations using Kelly's data, 29 percent of absences were because of vacancies.

Tiffany Thenor, a teacher at Philip O' Brien Elementary in Lakeland, said she is not surprised vacancies are such a high reason for needing a substitute. Because of the class-size amendment, schools pack teachers' classes and the extra students require one or more additional teachers – but the school might not have extra teachers, so a sub is called. Additionally, teachers have been leaving mid-year for personal reasons or because of the Deferred Retirement Option Program (DROP).

The Polk County School District does not track substitute data, leaving the task to Kelly, which issues periodic reports to the district.

Annis Wilfalk, the district's director of recruiting and educator quality, said the district is taking note of trends and trying to find a way to collect data to understand the reasons behind the trends.

“Ultimately the goal is to have fewer absences,” she said. “That's not a win for the substitute industry, but for the public school system it's definitely a win ... In the end it can only have a positive influence on students' ability and student achievement because they have a consistent teacher who is there, and instruction is consistent.”

Although Polk teachers were absent less than the national average, which the National Council on Teacher Quality placed at 11 days in a 2014 study, Polk's absence rate is likely rising this school year. A report issued by Kelly with data from August to January shows nearly as many absences during those months as in the previous school year.

According to Kelly's data for this school year, teacher absences peaked in October. Perhaps unsurprisingly, Friday has been the most common day for absences.

While elementary schools accounted for nearly half of teacher absences, Kathleen High School topped the list of the 20 individual schools with the largest number of absences, logging about 1,400 days as of January. That's 3 percent of the district's teacher absences.

That's one trend Wilfalk says she wants to understand better. It wasn't just Kathleen: Boone Middle, Lake Region High, Haines City High and George Jenkins High were also in the top five.

Perhaps relevant: Polk has more elementary schools than middle or high schools, but (most) high schools have larger teaching staffs.

Kelly reports that it fills most (64 percent) absences in less than one hour. Another 17.5 percent take one to six hours to be filled.

If the company cannot find a substitute to fill the position, or if the school's sub budget has run dry, schools often pull in a person such as a math coach or reading coach to cover the class, or they split the students among the other classes at the same grade level.

That's not a good situation for teachers or students, said Thenor, who is leaving the public school system at the end of the year.

"It's usually really inconvenient," she said, because teachers are usually not on the exact same material and haven't prepared supplies for extra students.

Sometimes it has to happen.

But even if a substitute is found, it's still not convenient. Teachers are expected to have emergency plans prepared for a substitute, but Thenor said she and most of her co-workers don't have organized plans in place.

So they end up coming to school early when they are sick, before students arrive, to prepare materials for a sub if they take a sick day.

"It's so much harder to plan for a sub – and do it well – than to come to school (while sick)," she said.

This year, Thenor gave in and missed one unplanned day because she lost her voice.

But she missed two planned months at the beginning of the year because she knew she wanted to take some time at home with her baby, who was due right before the beginning of the school year.

Knowing so far in advance, Thenor was able to select the sub she wanted, someone she knew, and took time over the summer to prepare two months' worth of plans. In addition, she came on the first day of school and for orientation, to reassure parents.

“Parents are wary of a substitute teacher starting the school year,” she said. “It's tough.”

The School District has been pleased with Kelly's high fill rate for schools, and some teachers told The Ledger they have been mostly pleased with the subs they have received since Kelly took over. The exceptions include subs who seemed unprofessional or were inappropriately dressed.

Schools are able to request that a sub not be placed at the school again.

To work as a substitute teacher in Polk, a person needs to have completed at least 30 college credits. Kelly also requires an application, reference letters, an interview, a background screen, a drug screen, a fingerprint screen and a national sex offender search. In addition, subs participate in professional development training.

People with a bachelor's degree are able to work as a long-term sub without interruption; and those without a degree can work for 10 days at a time but then must take at least a day break.

One group that has not been pleased is teachers and parents of students who have disabilities, especially those who need physical assistance. Kelly has a no-touch policy for its subs, so they cannot help students physically, and the company does not allow its substitutes to work in the center schools that are specifically for students who have disabilities. However, its subs are still working in self-contained classrooms, which have students with the same types of needs.

The district has been trying to address the problem. Staff worked to start a district-managed pool of substitutes specifically for the center schools. Now, Wilfalk said, they are talking with Kelly to try to come up with a solution.

Thenor has seven years' experience as a teacher, but she also worked as a sub through the school district while she was in college.

The thing that stood out most to her as a sub was that some teachers were very good at preparing for subs, and others were not.

“When I'd sub in a classroom ill-prepared, I remember days I'd literally just had to wing it,” she said. “I had no plans to get me through the day.”

As an education major, she said, she had extra motivation to be a high-quality sub:

“Every school I went to was a potential place to work.”

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