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McHenry County school districts try to balance teacher absences, development

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The financial woes in Johnsburg's District 12 have forced it **to** run a deficit, borrow **to** make ends meet and eliminate the equivalent of 14 full-time teaching and administrative positions. The budget crunch, though, has had an unintended consequence.

A slashed budget for professional **development** may have made the district one of the few in **McHenry County** **to** have hardly any of its teachers miss more than 10 days in a **school** year.

McHenry County has the highest rate of **teacher** absenteeism in the collar counties and the 11th highest in the state, according **to** an analysis of U.S. Department of Education survey results. About 35 percent of teachers were out of the classroom at least 10 days during the 2011-12 **school** year compared **to** the state average of about 24 percent.

For student achievement, that level of absenteeism is the equivalent of having a brand new **teacher** instead of one with two or three years of experience, according **to** a June 2014 report from the National Council on **Teacher** Quality, a think tank that pushes for reforms aimed at improving **teacher** effectiveness.

District 12 falls far below the county average with just under 3 percent of teachers missing that much time.

"Anytime you can keep your classroom teachers in the classroom, that's a benefit," District 12 Superintendent Dan Johnson said. "That's pretty much universal. Teachers are talented people."

McHenry District 15, on the other hand, reported that about 61 percent of its teachers missed more than 10 days and at one of its schools, Edgebrook Elementary **School**, more than 80 percent of teachers were out that much – though Mark Bertolozzi, the district's chief financial officer, questioned the data's accuracy.

"We don't really know where the numbers are coming from," he said, adding the district couldn't replicate how those numbers would have been produced.

The data are hindered by the fact that 19 Illinois **school districts** did not submit information **to** the federal government. None of those **districts** with missing data was in **McHenry County**.

After doing a little digging, District 15 concluded that its teachers used an average of six sick days last year, including maternity leave and extended leaves taken under the Family and Medical Leave Act, Bertolozzi said.

That number, though, doesn't include all the other reasons students could end up with a substitute **teacher**, including professional **development**, field trips, meetings or supervising testing.

Personal and sick days are laid out in **teacher** contracts and are pretty similar across **McHenry County districts**.

District 15 teachers accumulate 12 sick days a year plus four personal days compared with District 12, which doles out 13 sick days and four personal days.

Full-time Nippersink District 2 teachers earn 15 or 10 sick days each year – depending on when they joined the district – plus two personal days. Richmond Burton Community High **School** District 157 teachers get 14 sick days and two personal days.

Harvard's District 50 also gives its teachers 14 sick days and two personal days, but its contract also lays out that teachers get one day for professional **development**.

Teachers have **to** get approval from their principal **to** miss more time than that, spokesman Bill Clow said.

District 50 also fell below the state average, according **to** the Northwest Herald analysis. About 20 percent of its teachers were out of the classroom more than 10 days in the 2011-12 **school** year.

"Over the last couple of years, we made a very strong effort **to** provide professional **development** in-house, and we **try to** make those after **school** and during the summer," Clow said, adding that sometimes, though, teachers need specialized programs that they can only get during the **school** day.

Providing quality in-house training also can be pricey.

An autism training District 50 put on in August was “not an inexpensive training,” Clow said, but the district was able **to** defray some of its costs by offering the training **to** other **districts’** teachers.

The strategy isn’t uncommon.

District 12 and District 15 are trying **to** do more training in-house as well as limiting costs and **teacher** absenteeism by sending one **teacher to** a program instead of a whole department. That **teacher** can then train others.

“It really comes down **to** the dollars and cents,” Johnson said, adding that the district has had **to** rethink how it does things.

“I don’t think we’re shortchanging anything,” he said. “There’s always extras that we’d love **to** get, but we’ve managed **to** get those trainings through a different method.”

Three years ago, District 15 negotiated a longer day on Wednesdays with its teachers union, Assistant Superintendent Josh Reitz said. The lion’s share of professional **development** occurs on those days, rotating through curriculum, technology, Common Core discussions and assessments. Some days are given over **to** collaborative support teams.

“Staff **development** is really a priority in our district, and we see it as something we owe our parents and the community,” he said. “There’s a lot of issues going on, and we’re making sure we stay on top of them.”

Bertolozzi said he thinks the district does a good job balancing the two needs.

District 157 also offers training during the **school** day, before or after **school** and over the summer, Superintendent Dan Oest said in an email.

The district falls right below District 15 on the rankings with about 56 percent of its 50 or so teachers missing more than 10 days over the 2011-12 **school** year. Its sister district – Nippersink District 2 shares the same superintendent and much of its district staff – reported about 43 percent of its teachers missing at least that many days.

“Certainly, having the **teacher** in the classroom as much as possible is the most desirable,” Oest said in the email. “Unfortunately many of the professional **development** opportunities presented **to** teachers occur during the **school** day. ... The demands associated with reshaping instruction in response **to** the new state standards, new state assessments, and the rapidly changing world of technology require training time from our educators, in order **to** improve the instructional program.”

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