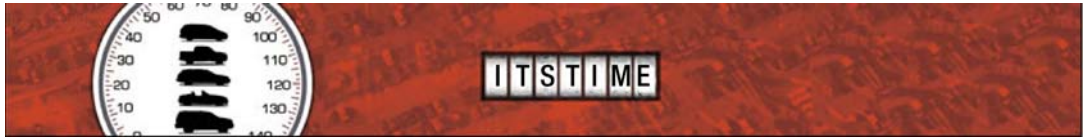


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High teacher absences prompt incentives

By SHERRY KOONCE

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Finding ways to keep teachers in the classroom has become a lesson in creativity for some area districts that are offering much more than a gold star for perfect attendance.

Because teacher absences can be costly and interrupt students' educations, some districts are looking at innovative ways to increase teacher attendance.

Carthage school board members during their April meeting voted to set aside \$5,000 as incentive pay to promote perfect attendance among teachers.

The district also created a second \$5,000 account for non-administrative personnel, but it is teacher absences that can cost the most.

Beginning next year, each \$5,000 pool of money will be divided among teachers, or support staff, who have perfect attendance.

Last year there was only one teacher with perfect attendance, said Reba Allison, superintendent.

"If you think about it, the chance of receiving some of the \$5,000 will be fairly impressive. I think this is worth trying," Allison said.

The expenditure makes perfect fiscal sense in a district where teacher absenteeism is a problem — and in Carthage, it is, Allison said.

In addition to the five personal days given to all Texas school districts by the state, school boards can adopt local policy allowing additional sick or personal leave.

Carthage gives its 204 teachers an added 10 days, making a total of 15 days teachers can take off during the school year. Those days, Allison said, can be used as sick leave, or for personal leave.

When a teacher is absent from the classroom for the day, a substitute is called in. At CISD, substitutes with degrees are paid \$70 per day while a non-degreed substitute is paid \$55 per day.

At the end of the fall semester, CISD teachers logged a total of 1,325 absences. Though some were school-related — teachers not in the classroom because they are attending training or other school-related functions — a substitute still has to be called in.

At \$55 per day, the lowest of the two rates paid, the district would be out some \$72,875 during the fall semester.

That's an expenditure Allison said needs to be decreased.

In addition to the \$5,000 perfect attendance money pot, CISD already offers teachers a bonus at the end of the school year. For each unused sick day up to five days, teachers will receive a \$50 bonus.

Allison said if every teacher received a \$250 bonus at the end of the school year, it would still come out cheaper than paying substitutes — and students would have the advantage of having their own teacher in the classroom.

"I think the biggest dividend this will pay is on student achievement," Allison said. "We think our teachers are great. They are the heart and soul of this district, so we want them here every day."

Before making the recommendation to provide monetary incentives, Allison said she talked with other schools in the area and studied professional journals, only to realize CISD was not unique.

Teachers take paid time off from school for a variety of reasons, mostly illness or sometimes to take care of personal business that requires more than the half-day allowed before a substitute is called in, Allison said.

Other times, a teacher may request time off for personal reasons: to be with family, go on trips, etc.

In those cases, teachers are required to submit their requests to campus principals two days prior to the time they would like to have off.

"The principal does have the right to say yes or no based on staffing needs," Allison said.

Joy Baskin, director of legal services for the Texas Association of School Boards in Austin, said her department often hears concerns about the limited number of good, qualified substitute teachers available to step into the classroom.

"It is not as much concern that the teacher has flown the coop, or done something wrong," she said. "It's more about finding a good, quality replacement."

Melanie Martin, a 17-year veteran elementary school teacher at Longview ISD, said she knows what it is like to leave her class in the hands of a substitute.

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Now a kindergarten teacher at Doris McQueen Elementary, Martin said she seldom — only once this year — calls in sick. She has on occasion gone to work when she was not feeling up to par, but was not contagious.

"You miss out. You miss your kiddos because they have become part of your family," Martin said.

The students miss their teacher too, she said.

"I feel like if I have to be out, we've got a great group of subs, but I still hate to be absent."

Not all teacher absences can be avoided. When teachers need to participate in training exercises or take their students to competitions, those days count as an absence, and a substitute teacher is called in.

At Longview ISD, there is room for improvement in the number of teacher absences across the district, but the district offers no incentives, said Brian Bowman, community and media relations coordinator.

LISD employs 577 certified teachers. Those teachers receive five personal days per year and another five from the district's local policy.

Bowman said the district pays \$60 per day for non-certified substitutes. Those who are certified receive \$80 per day. An assignment of more than 15 consecutive days for the same classroom is considered long-term, and the rate increases.

The amount of money LISD has expended on substitute teacher pay this year was not available.

For teachers taking time for staff development and school business, LISD has budgeted \$237,870 for this school year. Another \$704,788 is budgeted for absences due to sickness, using personal days and other reasons, Bowman said.

"Like any business in the United States, we can always improve our attendance," Bowman said. "We want teachers in the classroom every day possible because that is when the best instruction is going on — when the certified classroom teacher is there with his/her class."

Typically, school districts offer teachers an additional five days of personal or sick leave time, though some districts offer more as incentive to attract the best teachers, Baskin said.

In Ore City, Superintendent Lynn Heflin said the district had addressed teacher attendance at the beginning of the school year.

"We requested that our teachers make every effort to be here, to try to limit the number of days they are absent," Heflin said, adding absences are costly.

Ore City ISD does not offer monetary incentives, he said.

Teachers there get the customary five personal leave days granted by the state and an additional 10 from the district.

The district pays substitutes \$50 for each day their services are required.

With a total of 68 teachers, so far the district has spent \$42,500 on sub pay. The number of absences includes teacher training or other school-related activities, Heflin said.

"Teacher absenteeism certainly does hurt the district," Heflin said. "It is a two-fold problem. First, from a financial standpoint, and secondly from how it affects the learning process."

Teachers employed at Spring Hill ISD may earn a \$100 bonus at the end of each semester for perfect attendance.

The district offers five days for personal or sick leave in addition to the mandatory five days from the state.

Of the district's 149 teachers, 50 received the \$100 incentive payment for perfect attendance this fall semester, said Superintendent Wes Jones.

Since the beginning of the school year, Jones said 650 absences among teachers had been recorded. Those absences do not include school related functions.

Though Jones said teacher absenteeism is not a problem at Spring Hill, the practice of offering incentives is pretty standard among districts.

At Henderson ISD, there are no incentives offered to keep the teachers in the classroom.

Among the 266 teachers employed at Henderson ISD, 758 absences were recorded from August 7, 2006, until April 30, said Teresa Fears, data processing coordinator in the district's business office.

The district pays \$66 per day for substitutes.

Henderson teachers get the customary five state days and another three personal or sick leave days offered by the district.

Efforts to obtain information from Hallsville and Pine Tree school districts were unsuccessful.

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