

TWO PRIORTIES

Maternity Leave at Interstate 35: Two Priorities

Nick Ellis, Editor in Chief
Sunday, December 11, 2016

“Two days per year shall be granted upon request for the birth or adoption of a child. One day shall be subtracted from sick leave.”

Contractually, Interstate 35’s employees are afforded one paid day for the birth of their children. After day one, mothers are reliant on their compounding sick day allotment to fill in the remaining weeks of their maternity leave.

Providing paid maternity leave for employees in school districts can be complicated and difficult in fiscal and logistical terms. Complicated and difficult does not mean out of reach.

“It is fairly common to provide maternity leave for employees. I have seen both [paid and unpaid maternity leave] in my practice. I think we would all agree it [maternity leave] has a public purpose and a public benefit as well in allowing the person taking the leave to have time to prepare before and after the birth of the child. To do all of those things, it’s really felt to be a

good public service not only for the mother but for society in general,” explained Charles Gribble, an attorney with expertise in collective bargaining and workforce law, about maternity leave in school districts.

Though the absence of paid maternity leave isn’t necessarily the fault of the administration or school board. The financial accounts of school districts are mandated by the state to be separated into distinct funds accounts in which no money is allowed to be transferred from one type of a fund to another. For example, moving money from a fund designated for building and construction to the general fund used for teacher salaries and benefits isn’t a possibility.

“A district could do it [provide maternity leave] but since you can’t generate money we don’t have the flexibility. It could

be done, yes but, you’d have to find that money somewhere else. So this a rhetorical question, but is that a higher priority than having smaller class sizes and having fewer teachers? That’s what this ends up boiling down to in a school budget.” remarked Kevin Fiene, I-35 Superintendent.



A rough estimate for the cost of providing paid maternity leave for 6 weeks in our district would be about \$13,000 anticipating the salary and benefits of the teacher and the substitute’s salary. According to the district’s most recent audit report, the expenditure for instruction (compromised teacher’s salary and benefits), was \$6,275,540 in the fiscal year 2015. A striking difference is made by the cost of a 6 week paid maternity leave and the annual cost of instruction. The \$13,000 cost of providing maternity leave as a percentage of the total annual cost of instruction is 0.2%.

The \$13,000 cost of providing maternity leave as a percentage of the total annual cost of instruction is 0.2%.

TWO PRIORTIES

The cost of maternity leave is even returned to the district nearly 9 times over if the mother's child then attends Interstate 35. The district receives \$8,874 dollars annually per pupil according in the fiscal year 2015 according to the Iowa Department of Education. This means that if this child goes to Interstate 35 from kindergarten all the way through high school the district would receive \$115,362.

The bottom line is currently teachers aren't provided parental leave. The closest thing to paid maternity leave our district has is the sick day bank. The sick day bank at Interstate 35 is a fairly simple system: the staff donates sick days at the beginning of each year and if a members runs out of their own sick days they can apply to withdraw.

The idea for the sick leave bank came from Heather Dutrey, an Interstate 35 teacher, because of the generosity of small school teachers and an organic need for more leave days.

"After having my first child without having any extra leave days another teacher in the district wanted to give me their days because they had so many, but they weren't allowed," explained Dutrey. "He and I approached the superintendent and the school board during the negotiations about starting a sick leave bank that people who had several hundred sick days

could donate their days to"

The sick leave bank can be used for emergency situations and maternity leave. It's worth mentioning that teachers are much less likely to receive days from the bank if they're a mother with a standard birth as compared to someone who has an emergency situation or a birth with complications. It's

also fair to say that some teachers look down on the use of the sick bank for maternity leave, because they see pregnancy as a choice thus discouraging teachers from using this system.

Our district's maternity leave system is designed this way because of the implications maternity leave policy has in the teaching profession.

"It's our responsibility as teachers to make sure students are well prepared for college. If we leave for something like maternity leave, it's a big worry for teachers

that their students get what they need," explained Stephanie Good, I-35 teacher, and mother of three. "I've dealt with working at home on maternity leave even if I'm not getting paid that day. It happens. I

guess that's just something that goes along with being a teacher."

"I think the hardest thing is that you take both with: as a teacher and as a mom. When I am at school I'm worried about my daughter and when I'm with my daughter I'm worried about preparing for school."

- Alex Sanchez

The nature of teaching dictates a "parent like" responsibility for your classroom. Teachers feel obligated to assist substitutes by preparing plans and making sure students learn the required materials even though they are on unpaid maternity leave. Unintentionally by our current policy, it's possible for a teacher

to be doing their job as if they were still here except without pay. An occurrence that simply happens because they ran out of "sick days" which they were required to use for their maternity leave.

To understand the real importance of providing paid maternity leave, you have to look past politics, audit reports, and contractual language to see real-life human examples. Take the honest account of Alex Sánchez, I-35's dedicated Spanish teacher, and new mother:

"You are never off duty. I am taking care of the baby, or I'm at school. I don't have any time anymore where I feel like I can just do nothing. I think the hardest thing is that you take both with you as a teacher and as a mom. When I am at school, I'm worried about my daughter, and when I'm with my daughter, I'm worried about preparing for school."