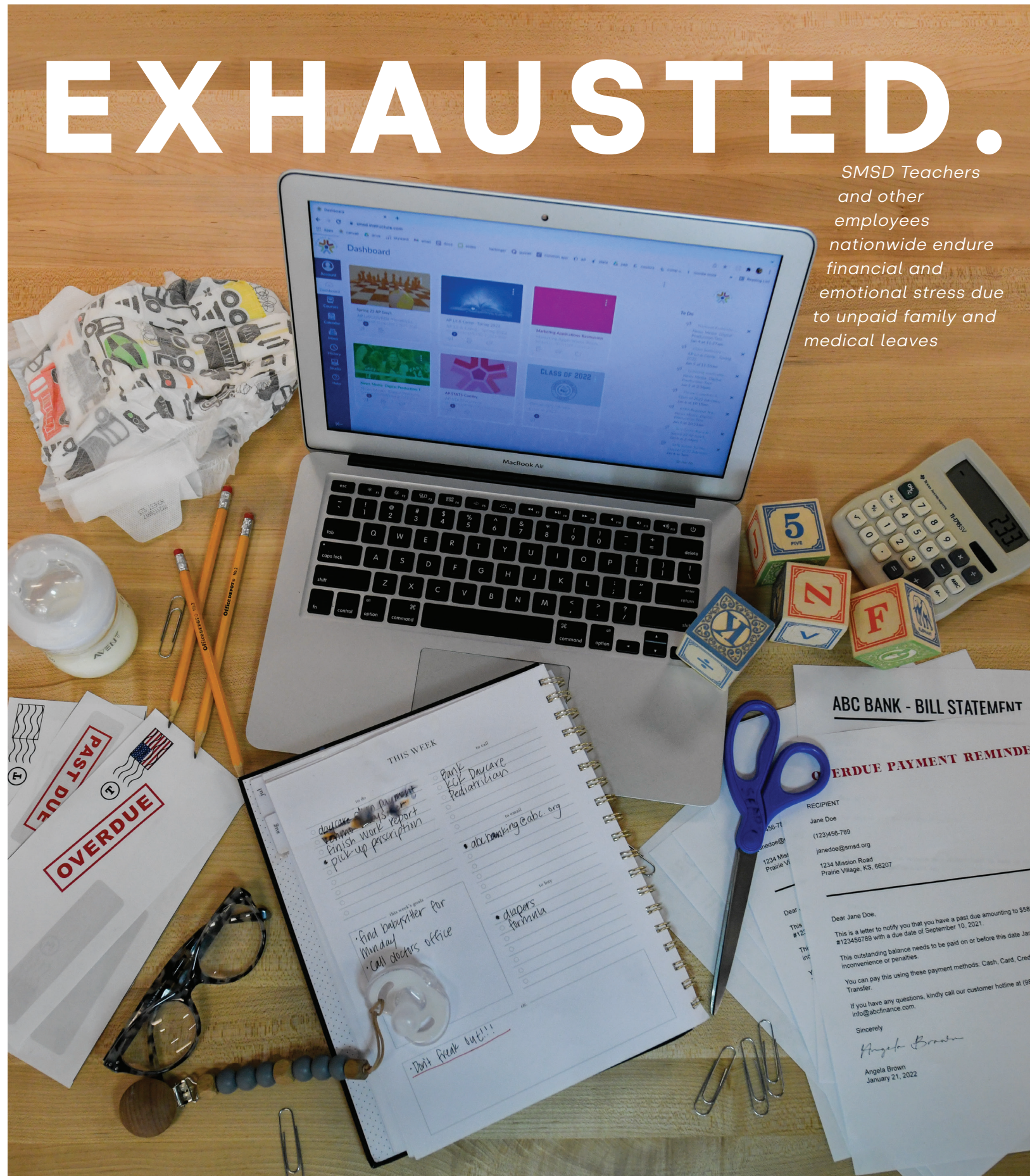


EXHAUSTED.

SMSD Teachers and other employees nationwide endure financial and emotional stress due to unpaid family and medical leaves



by cesca stamati

SWOLLEN, NAUSEOUS, EXHAUSTED and demonstrating how to use a floor hockey stick, gym teacher Maggie Archer spent the last of her energy shooting a puck for her first hour gym class. She was nine months pregnant, and walking 15,000 steps a day at work, five days a week.

It was December 2 — six days before her due date. It wasn't until third hour that Maggie had a moment to herself while her students were working on an assignment. Her husband, gym teacher Douglas Archer, had a planning period, so she went down to his office.

"I think I'm having contractions."

The Archers drove straight to the hospital after third hour. The contractions were real. She was thankful that the baby was finally coming — swollen ankles and dodgeball didn't mix. But even if her baby hadn't come five days early, Maggie would've continued working until her due date. She needed to get paid.

"[It's normal to do that] for most professions, unless you have a great policy with your company or insurance saying you can have paid time prior to giving birth," Maggie said. "Most teachers are working up until they give birth."

Teachers in SMSD and school district employees nationwide endure relatively poor family and medical leave policies compared to other countries, making monthly bills hard to pay and adding on to the already stressful postpartum experience. In SMSD, teachers don't have the option of paid leave other than using "sick" days or applying for short-term disability through their insurance plan. The district, along with the Blue Valley and Olathe school districts, strictly follows the Family Medical Leave Act, which allows employees to take up to 60 work days off after the birth, foster or adoption of a child. However, this leave is unpaid.

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The Family and Medical Leave Act provides eligible employees up to 12 workweeks of unpaid leave a year, and requires group health benefits to be maintained during the leave if employees continued to work instead of taking leave.

English teacher Brandi Krahulik, who came back from maternity leave in November, believes that government workers' benefits are shoved aside in budgets, and wishes the government would allocate more money for employee benefits — the way private companies do. According to the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, state and city employees — such as school district workers — receive less compensation, including benefits, than workers for private companies.

Maggie agrees that either the district or government should pay teachers full wages during leaves.

"There's nothing cheap about having a child," Maggie said. "So if I'm going to grow a human, then yes, I should still receive my wages, 1,000%. It's hard work."

This standard of unpaid leaves in the U.S. isn't up to par with the minimum 14 weeks of paid maternity leave women should be given, according to International Labour Organization standards. America lags behind other countries in leave standards, being one of six countries in the world without any form of national paid family or medical leave, and the only wealthy one, according to The New York Times. Douglas thinks paid leaves are a national issue, not necessarily the district's

problem as the employer.

"As far as our country goes, I don't think it's out of the norm, what the district does," Douglas said. "It's kind of the nature of the beast of being in the United States and not having [paid leave] as an option yet."

Paid leave could help employees pay for the costs of having a child, according to Maggie. First, there are the medical costs — \$5,000 to \$11,000 is the average charge without insurance for a vaginal delivery in most states, according to FAIR Health. Then, there are the expenses of caring for a new baby — formula, diapers, daycare, food.

In a baby's first year of life, the average middle-income U.S. family spends around \$12,000 on child-related expenses, according to a 2010 USDA report.

Paying the price of childbirth without earning wages for the duration of the leave forces employees to tightly budget. The Archers made a spreadsheet of their monthly income and expenses when she was pregnant, looking for areas to reduce spending to save for groceries and diapers.

And on top of financial planning, teachers must make arrangements for work. Krahulik had to apply for FMLA and write lesson plans for the substitute teacher — which can pile up when leaves are up to 60 work days. And if there are complications with childbirth, a teacher must plan ahead to receive short-term disability, which can give employees partial pay as they are considered to be disabled after giving birth. This is one of the few options for many teachers to receive pay during their family leave.

Employees applying for short-term disability can get 70% of their check for about 6-8 weeks depending on whether the birth was vaginal or a cesarian section. To receive this partial pay, a teacher has to have paid insurance up to \$44 of their monthly paycheck, according to SMSD employee benefits facilitator Jennifer Lumley.

Science teacher Stephanie Valencia received short-term disability when she worked for Fort Leavenworth School District before coming to SMSD. The district was similar to SMSD in that both asked teachers to use their accumulated days off for their leave and strictly followed FMLA.

But FMLA doesn't cover extra time, even for special cases. Her first son was born prematurely — nine weeks early. Due to complications, she was in the hospital for a couple of weeks before his birth, then returned to work and paused her leave while the hospital gave him medical attention for six weeks. She only spent six weeks with him after the hospital released him.

When the six weeks were up, she had to go back to work, and her duties at home were still waiting when she made it back from the 45 minute drive home. She had to wake up in the middle of the night and pump milk for her newborn. Her husband stayed at work late, so she had to take care of her son and get him to bed. Sometimes, she couldn't start grading papers until 9 o'clock. She was exhausted.

And coming back from her second maternity leave, it grew even more difficult for Valencia to balance grading papers with raising kids.

"Having two young children... you don't get a lot of sleep," she said.

Luckily, she'd been teaching eighth grade science

for several years and had pre-made lesson plans. A new teacher would have to create new plans, so Valencia feels fortunate that she switched jobs after having both her children.

"The first year I worked here... I was staying up 'till like 2 o'clock in the morning doing stuff," Valencia said. "So I can't even imagine people that are switching jobs and also have children that are waking up in the middle of the night."

But for new employees like FACS teacher Brianne Stockman, short-term disability and saved paid time-off aren't an option. When Stockman had her last child, it was her first year in the district and she was pregnant coming in, so she couldn't apply for FMLA or short-term disability. It was considered a "pre-existing condition." These cases typically aren't covered by insurance, according to Lumley.

Stockman says the financial impact of the unpaid time on her family was tremendous. She wasn't planning on having another kid when she accepted the job at SMSD, but thinks it might have made her and her husband reconsider a fourth child if they'd planned on one.

"We're still dealing with some of those repercussions," Stockman said. "Medical bills are very expensive for having a baby."

Stockman has experienced different leave policies in two school districts. Park Hill School District gave her six weeks of paid maternity leave for her first child. She worked in the same district for her second one, but they increased their leaves to eight weeks paid, and she could add more time through FMLA — almost 12 weeks of leave.

Her most recent leave in SMSD was six weeks. Unpaid. Unlike SMSD, Park Hill also took only 20 days of her accumulated paid days off to go toward her leave. Many school districts, including SMSD, require teachers to use all of their accumulated sick days on their leave — another factor that teachers wish was different about their maternity leave policy.

Each year, SMSD teachers get 10 days that accumulate in a bank of paid days off. But since teachers must use them all during their leave, they're left without paid personal or sick days when they return to school. When babies are sick, have doctor's appointments or need someone to watch them, teachers have no choice but to take even more unpaid time off.

"When I go back to school, I've exhausted all my leave," Maggie said. "If Landon is sick and one of us has to stay home, I hope my husband still has [sick] days left to use, or else I'm taking a no-paid day or hoping my parents can take her. It's a whole other headache to worry about."

When Maggie's baby was born, Douglas took seven out of his 10 personal days to stay home with his first child. It wasn't enough time. He wishes he could be with his baby all day, but knows Maggie will run out of paid personal days after her leave. Someone has to be there if the baby has a fever or needs someone to watch her.

"Maggie said that she rolled over the other day," Douglas said. "It's just tough missing those milestones, being at work. But it's just kind of the world we live in."

Still, taking unpaid leave for a new child never occurred to Douglas or Maggie when they started working at SMSD — they knew they wanted to be

teachers no matter what. But the lack of benefits leads some teachers to plan ahead on the most convenient time to have a baby, down to the ideal month, according to social studies teacher Emily Fossoh, who has been on three leaves while working for SMSD.

"I've heard some teachers think about planning to have their kid in the spring so that they can just finish the year with the leave and then go into the summer," Fossoh said. "A lot of teachers' kids are in March or April, and then they take the rest of the year off and have summer

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STEPHANIE VALENCIA •
SCIENCE TEACHER



to spend with them so they have more of that time."

For parents, more time off means more moments with their newborn — playing peek-a-boo, shaking rattles, singing lullabies. But for the country, extra weeks of paid leave mean greater national spending, which is the reason a potential four weeks of national paid family and medical leave was vetoed by the Senate after months of consideration. This provision regarding leaves was originally part of President Joe Biden's Build Back Better Act — which has been rendered "dead" after a stall in debating. Even if the bill is salvaged, the paid family leave provision is likely to be cut from the plan, according to Reuters.

While the U.S. is unable to settle on a national paid leave policy, 12 weeks paid is the standard for many other countries, some less financially stable than the U.S. Leave policies in nations such as Canada are more generous in terms of duration, flexibility and paid benefits, according to Investopedia. The Canadian government mandates maternity benefits equal to 55% of a worker's average weekly insurable wage for 15 weeks.

"There can always be a little jealousy 'cause I have sorority sisters that live in Canada and Australia, and they get a whole year off no matter what," Fossoh said. "Having a little bit more paid leave is obviously ideal."

Even if the U.S. had four weeks, it would still stand out among countries that have national paid leaves. Only 26 out of 174 countries currently offer four weeks or fewer of paid medical leave, according to the World Policy Analysis Center, and the global average maternity leave is 29 weeks. Maggie hopes that America's leave policies will eventually match other countries' standards, even if it means starting with the four weeks that could resurface in future legislation.

"Any time we can get our full check, like paid leave, is amazing," Maggie said. "I wish it was more than four weeks, but hopefully that's a step in the right direction and hopefully that four weeks can be on top of things like short-term disability. Any paid leave we can get, bring it on."