The Substitute Teacher Gap: Recruitment and Retention Challenges in the Age of Covid-19

Executive Summary

An increase in teacher absences and the need to fill more positions than ever before have created a new set of challenges in the world of substitute teacher recruitment and retention. In December of 2019 and January of 2020, the EdWeek Research Center explored these challenges with a nationally representative, online survey of more than 2,000 principals, district leaders, and school board members. Survey results suggest that the challenge is big and getting bigger: Districts are currently able to fill just 54 percent of the approximately 250,000 teacher absences each day, the survey found. Yet substitute teachers are increasingly being tapped to fill positions as the number of vacancies is on the rise. The situation is only expected to get more challenging as most administrators and school board members predict the need for substitutes to increase. One reason is that teacher absence rates have risen. Millennials who have replaced retiring Boomers enter their child-bearing years, meaning they are more likely to need maternity leave and/or time off to care for sick children. Another reason is the Covid-19, which is expected to recur in waves over the next year. This may create additional shortages as educators with health problems stay home even if schools remain open, and those who fall ill during closures need substitute teachers who can assume their responsibilities. There is much uncertainty around the future education landscape but what is certain is the fact that substitute educators, either in-person or remote-base, will be in demand. The majority of administrators and school board members say...
that it would help to increase substitute teacher pay, which currently hovers around $100 a day for a job that often requires a bachelor’s degree. However, they also say they’d need to boost their rates by a minimum of 26 percent in order to get results. Given the reality of school budgets, that might not be feasible, especially since most survey respondents say that, once inflation is taken into account, substitute teacher pay has not increased in the past five years. In addition, the economic downturn linked to the pandemic is already having a detrimental effect on district budgets.

While the downturn may temporarily make substitute teaching more attractive as unemployment rates rise, that situation will likely change when the economy recovers. The paper concludes with potential solutions including professional development, better recruitment and retention, and “grow-your-own” programs that encourage students, paraprofessionals, parents, and others to become teachers.

Introduction

As schools re-open in the wake of Covid-19 closures, educators may find themselves with a changing and growing challenge: Teacher and substitute teacher recruitment and retention are changing rapidly and have entered a new era.

Enrollment in teacher preparation programs has declined by one third over the past decade. Yet the number of teaching positions has increased by 64 percent since the late 1980s. Researchers project that teacher demand will exceed supply by more than 110,000 positions annually for the foreseeable future. Short-term substitute teaching positions in particular have been difficult to fill as they typically pay around $100 daily for a job that does not usually provide benefits and often requires a bachelor’s degree.

Combined, these factors have created the perfect storm of challenges for school and district leaders seeking to staff their classrooms with well-prepared teachers.

In the winter of 2020, the EdWeek Research Center set out to explore these challenges by conducting a nationally representative, online survey of more than 2,000 K-12 educational leaders. Respondents included 1,454 school board members, 404 school principals, 99 school district superintendents, 61 district-level human resources officials, and 47 district-level business officers. In addition, the Center conducted in-depth phone interviews with five school board members, four district leaders, and three principals.

The results suggest strongly that educators and elected officials will face many fresh recruiting and retention challenges in the years to come but that a better understanding of the shifting landscape will help them navigate these potential pitfalls in ways that benefit students and schools.

Sizing up the Challenge

On an average school day, our findings show that eight percent of the nation’s 3.2 million public school teachers are absent, leaving administrators with more than 250,000 positions to fill with substitute teachers. The positions need to be filled fast: Our survey found that the typical teacher gives just 12 hours’ notice. The reality is that it is just not possible for most districts to find and
deploy enough substitute teachers to fill all their absences. On average, school and district leaders say they are able to cover just 54 percent of total absences with substitute teachers.

In the meantime, districts and schools face another challenge: The share of schools looking to fill teaching jobs increased by 11 percentage points to 79 percent between 2012 and 2016. As a result, administrators surveyed are nearly three times as likely to say that their teacher vacancy rate increased over the past five years than to say the percentage of unfilled positions declined.

How has your teacher vacancy rate [rate of unfilled teaching positions] changed over the past five years?

- Decreased a lot, 7%
- Decreased a little, 6%
- Increased a little, 20%
- Increased a lot, 17%
- Stayed the same, 50%

NOTE: Only school and district leaders were asked to respond to this question because it was unclear whether school board members would know the answer. “I don’t know” responses were removed from the analysis.

The Connection Between Unfilled Positions and the Substitute Teacher Shortage

Unfilled teaching positions can lead to a host of outcomes, from student behavior challenges to increases in class sizes. But the number 1 most common impact of teacher vacancies is that substitute teachers are increasingly tapped to fill teacher positions.

Among administrators who report that the percentage of unfilled teaching positions has increased a lot in the past half-decade, 60 percent say that substitute teachers are increasingly filling vacancies.
Teacher absences are helping to drive that demand: 56 percent of respondents say their teacher absence rates are higher today than they were five years ago.

NOTE: Only school and district leaders were asked to respond to this question because it was unclear whether school board members would know the answer. This chart only includes administrators who said their teacher vacancy rates had increased a lot in the past five years. Totals do not add up to 100 percent because respondents could select more than one option. Only the five most popular options are shown in this chart. Six options are shown because two options tied for fifth place. In addition to multiple-choice options, respondents could also write in an "other" response or select a response indicating that the increase had not impacted their district.

In the next five years, how, if at all, do you expect the following to change in your district or school?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Feature</th>
<th>Decrease</th>
<th>No change</th>
<th>Increase</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The need for substitute teachers</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>26</td>
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<tr>
<td>Teacher vacancy rates</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>41</td>
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<tr>
<td>Teacher absence rates</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>52</td>
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<tr>
<td>The number of applicants for permanent teaching positions</td>
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<td>33</td>
<td>21</td>
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<tr>
<td>The quality of permanent teacher applicants</td>
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<td>40</td>
<td>20</td>
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<tr>
<td>The number of applicants for substitute teaching positions</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The quality of substitute teacher applicants</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>12</td>
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</tbody>
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NOTE: Totals may not add up to 100 percent due to rounding.
“Many of those people that we do recruit to become substitutes end up getting hired as full-time teachers, which is great,” a California school board member said. “However, then we lose them on the substitute teacher roles.”

In the meantime, 71 percent of administrators and school board members predict that the demand for substitute teachers will increase in the next five years.

Teacher absences are helping to drive that demand: 56 percent of respondents say their teacher absence rates are higher today than they were five years ago.

There’s not much administrators can do about the number 1 reason: As Boomers have retired, they are being replaced by Millennials in their child-bearing years. As a result, more teachers are taking maternity leave or missing school to care for their own sick children.

“The state recently implemented 12-week paid maternity leave and long-term subs are not available,” a high school principal in Delaware said.

In addition, Covid-19 may create a new wave of teacher absenteeism as some experts expect the virus to recur in waves over the next year. As cases spike in a particular location, teachers with health problems may need to stay home, even if school buildings remain open. And even if schools are closed, when teachers do get ill, they may need substitutes to take over their remote instructional duties.

Although administrators cannot necessarily change demographic shifts or the impact of a worldwide pandemic, they can, of course, address other causes such as teacher morale, and the scheduling of professional development during school hours.
As the demand for substitute teachers increases, educators expect the supply to decline. More than half of school board members and administrators expect that fewer people will be applying for substitute teacher positions five years from now.

**The Solution: Higher Pay?**

The majority of administrators and school board members (84 percent) say substitute teachers in their districts are required to have at least some college. And 43 percent require a bachelor’s degree. However, $97 a day is the median rate of pay reported by survey respondents. That’s less than half of the median daily pay for college graduates in our country ($235).

“If it’s someone that has children, it doesn’t even pay for the cost of childcare,” said a school board member in Illinois. “So, it’s not even advantageous for anyone to even do it because it’s too costly.”

Sixty-five percent of school board members and administrators say a pay increase would improve the quality of substitute teaching in their school districts.

However, we then followed up with that 65 percent and asked: In your opinion, what is the minimum percentage pay increase your district/school would need to provide in order to increase the quality of the substitute teachers hired?

The average response? 26 percent.

Given the reality of school board budgets, 26 percent might not be feasible, especially given past realities: In fact, in the past five years, just 19 percent of survey respondents say their substitute teacher pay rates increased, taking into account inflation. As an economic downturn looms in the response to the impact of Covid-19, more than half of district leaders surveyed in April of 2020 say they have already reduced spending. More than half also expect spending to decrease in the next year.
Even if leaders can’t afford to raise salaries enough to make a difference, there’s another solution: Behind higher pay, professional development is the factor second most likely to improve substitute teaching, school board members and administrators say. It is almost certainly a less expensive solution than across-the-board salary increases.

Yet 44 percent of school board members and administrators say they currently provide no professional development to substitute teachers.

Sixty-five percent say that classroom management training would significantly improve substitute teaching in their districts or schools.

Yet only 11 percent actually offer training on that subject.

“I think it comes down to capacity because our instructional coaches already have numerous permanent employees...that need their support, and they can only do so much,” a principal in Washington said.

However, a district-level human resources director in New Jersey suggests that there are lower-lift approaches that administrators can take.

“I just wish that the building principals would talk to them when they see an issue,” she said.

“[Substitute teachers are] very valuable members of our community so we can’t just throw them away when it doesn’t work out once ... Just like we would retrain a teacher or addressing a need and help for growth with a teacher with things that are not egregious. We have to try to train them and have those conversations, not just automatically say, ‘I don’t want the substitute to come back to my building ever again.’”

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If Covid-19 continues to disrupt school schedules, the need for training may become even more urgent as instruction may well move online once again.

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Professional development: What’s offered versus what administrators and school board members say should be offered

- Classroom management
  - Would significantly IMPROVE substitute teaching in our district: 67%
  - Offered by our district: 11%

- Effective teaching strategies
  - Would significantly IMPROVE substitute teaching in our district: 44%
  - Offered by our district: 8%

- Ongoing professional development
  - Would significantly IMPROVE substitute teaching in our district: 38%
  - Offered by our district: 6%

- One-time orientation for substitutes new to the district
  - Would significantly IMPROVE substitute teaching in our district: 38%
  - Offered by our district: 34%

- District/school-specific policies and procedures
  - Would significantly IMPROVE substitute teaching in our district: 33%
  - Offered by our district: 23%

- Working with diverse student populations
  - Would significantly IMPROVE substitute teaching in our district: 28%
  - Offered by our district: 4%

- Teacher professionalism
  - Would significantly IMPROVE substitute teaching in our district: 28%
  - Offered by our district: 9%

- Proper planning and follow-up
  - Would significantly IMPROVE substitute teaching in our district: 25%
  - Offered by our district: 6%

- Educational laws and issues/liability issues
  - Would significantly IMPROVE substitute teaching in our district: 17%
  - Offered by our district: 8%

- Other
  - Would significantly IMPROVE substitute teaching in our district: 6%
  - Offered by our district: 4%

NOTE: 44 percent of respondents say their districts offer no professional development to substitute teachers. “I don’t know” responses were removed from the analysis. Totals do not add up to 100 percent because respondents were asked to select all that apply.

If Covid-19 continues to disrupt school schedules, the need for training may become even more urgent as instruction may well move online once again. If and when this happens, substitutes will almost certainly need assistance adapting to new technologies.

### The Solution: Improving Recruitment & Retention

Improving recruitment efforts is number four on survey respondents’ list of ways to improve substitute teaching in their districts.

Yet close to half of survey respondents (47 percent) say their district does not make any effort to recruit or retain substitute teachers.
“I used to teach in the district for many years, so when former students come back, I say, ‘Hey, heard you graduated college, do you think you might want to substitute or teach?’” said a school board member from California. “That’s pretty informal. We probably could do a better job by doing something a bit more formal than recruiting that way.”

Even relatively low-cost approaches are rare. For example, just three percent offer academic internship credits to students who substitute teach. Just six percent provide salary advances. And only eight percent participate in partnerships with institutions of postsecondary education.

One particularly promising approach: Grow-your-own programs in which school districts encourage their own students to consider teaching careers by providing opportunities such as college-credit teacher preparation courses in high school. The approach can also be used to recruit and prepare parents, para-professionals, and, yes, substitute teachers for full-time, credentialed teaching positions. Districts can also grow their own substitutes. Although there’s limited research available on the outcomes of this relatively new approach, such programs often aim to increase retention by targeting people like parents and students who are already committed to the community. In some
cases, they have also proven to increase diversity because youth and parent populations are often more diverse than the current teaching pool, which is majority female and white.

Despite the promise and benefits of this approach, just seven percent of survey respondents say their districts have used it.

**Conclusion**

When it comes to substitute teacher recruitment and retention, a sea change is underway and school districts are feeling the pain. Demand is up due to the changing demographics of the teacher population, which is increasingly comprised of Millennials who need to miss school for maternity leave and other responsibilities related to raising children, declining teacher morale, increases in absences due to professional development, and the desire for a better work-life balance. In addition, the pandemic may create additional needs for substitutes if it recurs, as expected, in waves, leading teachers with health challenges to stay home even if schools remain open, and increasing the demand for substitutes who can take over the remote learning responsibilities of teachers who fall ill with the virus. Schools may also need to reduce class size to maintain social distancing, creating a demand for more teachers.

In the meantime, supply is down due to a growing tendency to ask substitute teachers to step into positions that have also become more difficult to fill as few students enter teacher preparation programs. These challenges are not going away anytime soon. In fact, a majority of administrators and school board members surveyed expect the demand for substitute teachers to be higher five years from now than it is today.

Education leaders are struggling to overcome these challenges. Certainly, a popular option is higher substitute teacher pay. But survey respondents told us they’d need to offer at least 26 percent more to even begin to make a difference. Given the realities of school district budgets, this may not be possible. Other options include:

- Providing professional development that not only improves substitute teachers’ instructional ability but develops classroom management skills that help them avoid burnout and stress resulting from difficulties with student behavior. In the immediate future, substitute teachers may also benefit from being prepared to assume instructors remote learning responsibilities.

- Implementing basic recruitment and retention tactics from formally advertising the need for substitute teachers to offering incentives that encourage retention.

- Investing in grow-your-own programs that prepare districts’ students, parents, para-professionals, and substitute teachers for teaching positions. This approach has the added potential of increasing the level of diversity in the teaching corps as grow-your-owns may reach people who had not previously considered entering the teaching profession.

It will take a robust and concerted effort for school and district leaders to maintain strong instruction in the face of the substitute teacher gap. But the right investments in the right spots will make it easier to face limitations in quantity without sacrificing quality.