

Schools Face Teacher Crunch, Putting a Premium on Substitutes

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FULL TEXT

Because of staff shortages, some school districts are canceling classes. Others are lowering their hiring standards. The result can be a chaotic classroom.

When Amber McCoy called in sick this fall, there was not a substitute teacher who could step into her fourth-grade class in Huntington, W.Va.

Instead, her students at Kellogg Elementary School were taught by a rotating cast of seven staff members, including the assistant principal, who switched off every 45 minutes.

"We are basically relying on every other warm body in our school," Ms. McCoy said. Her current fear is that one day, several teachers will be out – with no one to fill in.

"We could shut the entire school down," she said.

Across the country, some schools are doing exactly that. Schools in Seattle will be closed on Friday because they allowed too many staff members to take the day off following the Veterans Day holiday. A Michigan school district has already closed down for several days this month. And some Colorado public schools have moved to remote learning this week, while others canceled classes altogether.

The shortage has become so acute that substitute teachers, who have historically earned low pay, suddenly find themselves on the beneficial side of the supply-demand equation. In some cases, that has led to a rise in wages – and steady work.

But as the crunch continues, some schools are lowering their standards for substitute teachers, which were already lower than those for full-time faculty. The situation has become dire enough that within the last month, at least two states, Missouri and Oregon, temporarily removed their college degree requirements for would-be hires. The moves have led to concerns by parents, educators and policymakers over the quality of instruction. It is already evident that a combination of school shutdowns and remote learning led to significant learning losses for students.

While Ms. McCoy is grateful for the school faculty that stepped in to teach her fourth graders, she also recognizes that most of them were not equipped to do her job.

"I think everyone that covered me really did their best," she said. But "the art teacher isn't going to deliver the same fourth-grade math instruction that I can."

Substitute teachers are "a short-term Band-Aid that shortchanges students," said Kim Anderson, executive director for the National Education Association, which represents millions of education workers across the country.

The problem starts with the need for more full-time teachers in many school districts. In Arizona, nearly 1,400 teachers left the profession within the first few months of the school year, according to one study. In Florida, the school year began with nearly 5,000 teacher vacancies, according to a video posted by the Florida Education Association's president, Andrew Spar.

Low pay, high stress and challenging working conditions have plagued the profession for years. But the fear over contracting the coronavirus has created "the perfect storm," Ms. Anderson said, and teachers are now leaving, or

retiring early.

"School districts are really relying on substitutes because there are many, many teachers who have left the field," Ms. Anderson said.

Oregon once had 8,290 licensed substitute teachers, but by Sept. 18, that number had been cut in half. To create a bigger pool, the state, in an Oct. 1 emergency order, created a new license. These substitutes no longer need to pass several tests, or have a bachelor's degree. They simply need to be at least 18 years old, sponsored by a participating district or charter school, and have "good moral character" with the "mental and physical health necessary" to teach.

In the two weeks after Oregon passed its measure, more than 180 people applied to work as a substitute in Portland public schools, the state's largest district, according to Sharon Reese, the district's chief human resources officer.

But, she said, "We're not just accepting anybody who walks through the door."

Missouri once required 60 college credits, the equivalent of an associate degree. Now, substitutes just need to complete a 20-hour online course on professionalism, diversity and classroom management.

"It sounds like what some of them are doing is substituting permanent teachers with substitutes," Erica Groshen, an economist at the Cornell University School of Industrial and Labor Relations, said.

The problem, she said, is that substitutes cannot be expected to provide the same kind of education as a permanent teacher, who has developed lesson plans to meet certain expectations.

But some schools are desperate. Last summer, Leanna Cartier, 54, attended a job fair in Arlington, Texas, to look into becoming a substitute teacher.

Ms. Cartier, a semiretired accountant, had taken online training courses on classroom management and conduct, and was hoping for a few sporadic work days. But she was surprised to learn that, if she wished, she could work every single day.

In fact, in September, when she signed in for the first time to teach a junior-high history class, the school offered her a full-time substitute teaching position on the spot.

"I thought, 'You don't know me from Adam, and you're inviting me to be a full-time sub!'" Ms. Cartier said.

In Miami, Joshua Hicks, 26, started substituting while in graduate school for sports administration. When the pandemic paused his plans, he started substituting more frequently. He now teaches a range of classes – from physical education to dance to history – at the Arthur & Polly Mays Conservatory of the Arts, a public school.

At one point, Mr. Hicks substituted for a month in two different classes, after each teacher got sick. Mr. Hicks said he believed that he and other substitute teachers are more than capable of teaching with authority.

"The only thing that separates us – and I'm not taking anything away from a full-time teacher – is the pay and that we do have the ability to say no," Mr. Hicks said.

Deborah Mitchell, 58, substitutes for Wake County Schools, in Raleigh, N.C., and does not consider her training to be particularly extensive.

Ms. Mitchell attended a three-day seminar, where she and others were trained by doing mock-teaching and classroom management.

"They rely on us because so many teachers are just dropping out," she said. "But with the amount of work that you need to do – you're not just a teacher, you're the social worker, the shoulder to cry on. It's a lot more than just 'teach me arithmetic.'"

She works about three to four days a week for about \$80 a day. It is less, she says, than what she would make working at Target, or as a babysitter.

And as schools continue to rely on substitutes to pick up the slack, some educators worry that this is what too many classrooms will become – some form of babysitting.

"My thinking is that they will find a way to keep the lights on," Ms. Groshen, the economist, said. "But whether the actual education taking place is up to the standards that we need – that's going to have an impact on this generation of children for a long time."

Photograph

FLORIDA: Winston Wallace, 9, at iPrep Academy in Miami. The state began the school year with nearly 5,000 teacher vacancies. (PHOTOGRAPH BY LYNNE SLADKY/ASSOCIATED PRESS); LEANNA CARTIER: An accountant by trade, she was offered a full-time substitute position on her first day filling in at a Texas junior high school. (PHOTOGRAPH BY ZERB MELLISH FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES); JOSHUA HICKS: He began subbing in Florida while in graduate school for sports administration and now teaches an array of subjects. (PHOTOGRAPH BY SAUL MARTINEZ FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES) (A17)

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