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Use of substitute teachers on the rise



Jodi Padavana (center) helps students Amanda Lang, left, and Ellie Norman with a frog dissection May 10, 2016, in her zoology class at Auburn High School in Rockford. MAX GERSH/GateHouse Media Illinois

After 13 years in public schools, Kyras Mattson has come to know that having a substitute teacher means an “easy” day.

There may be a worksheet or a movie, but “never anything serious,” the 18-year-old said while enjoying her last weeks of high school.

“Sometimes I like it, but being a senior — I want to get out of here and graduate so I need my actual teacher so he can tell me what I need to do in class,” Mattson said. “They have access to all of your files and access to what you need to do. It's just easier when there's not a sub.”

If the time Mattson has spent with substitute teachers is anything like the average experience for public school students across the United States, the Rockford, Illinois, resident will have spent almost the equivalent of a full academic year with substitute teachers during the course of her K-12 education.

A GateHouse Media examination of the issue found that absenteeism could be having a big impact on students like Mattson:

Nationally, teachers average 11 days absent each year, according to a 2014 study by the National Council on Teacher Quality, a Washington, D.C.-based think tank whose board includes members of the Reagan, Clinton and George W. Bush administrations. During the course of a 13-year education — kindergarten through 12th grade — that amounts to 143 days, or 6 percent of all the time a student spent in a classroom and roughly a month shy of a full 180-day school year.

Having a sub, according to several academic and thinktank studies and affirmed by a data analysis by GateHouse Media, is widely associated with lower student achievement.

The situation also may be getting worse: According to the research conducted in May by Gatehouse Media, the average number of days that some school districts had subs in the classroom last year was 14.5 — or 188.5 days over the course of 13 years. The data analysis also showed higher use of substitute teachers in some lower-income schools. The cost of substitute teaching is on the rise, as well. School districts spent \$334,666,568 on substitute teachers during the 2012-2013 school year, with 115 districts reporting. In 2014-2015, with 118 districts reporting, they spent \$355,689,087, a 6 percent increase in three years.

“Research has shown a significant negative impact on student achievement in classrooms where the teacher is absent for 10 days,” the National Council on Teacher Quality reports in its 2014 study, “Roll Call: The Importance of Teacher Attendance.” “Yet in the average classroom in this study, teachers exceeded this level of absence, often for perfectly legitimate reasons and even in pursuit of becoming a more effective instructor.

“Given the time and attention spent on school programs, new curriculum and strategies to strengthen teacher quality, we may be overlooking one of the most basic, solvable and cost-effective reasons why schools may fail to make educational progress,” the council concluded.

Sandi Jacobs, the council’s senior vice president for state and district policy, says “the bar has been raised for what we’re expecting of kids.”

“Every day is so precious. The idea that a substitute just needs to sort of hold down the fort for the day, and it doesn’t really matter if any real learning goes on — that’s harder and harder for districts to accept,” Jacobs said. “At the same time, finding people who could step into a class seamlessly and accomplish what the teacher would have accomplished had she been there is a very tall order.”

More subs, lower performance

Four billion dollars is spent on substitute teachers each year, according to a 2012 study titled “Teacher Absence as a Leading Indicator of Student Achievement” by Raegen T. Miller, a researcher at the left-leaning American Progress think tank in Washington.

Miller also co-authored “Do Teacher Absences Impact Student Achievement? Longitudinal Evidence from One Urban School District” in 2007 for the National Bureau of Economic Research, a national nonprofit whose research associates have won nearly two dozen Nobel Prizes.

Both studies — along with another 2007 examination of the issue “Are Teacher Absences Worth Worrying about in the U.S.?” co-authored by Duke University economist Charles Clotfelter — come to the same common-sense conclusion: Students’ academic achievement suffers when teachers aren’t in the classroom.

Among their findings:

- On average, 36 percent of teachers nationally were absent more than 10 days during the 2009-2010 school year based on the 56,837 schools analyzed in the data set, Miller found.
- A school with black students in the 90th percentile has a teacher absence rate 3.5 percentage points higher than a school with a black student population in the 10th percentile. In schools with more Latino students, the increase is 3.2 percentage points, Miller's research shows.
- Students whose teachers miss more days for sickness score lower on state achievement tests, Clotfelter found.
- Low-income students in North Carolina face an appreciably higher chance than affluent ones of attending a school with persistently high rates of teacher absence, Clotfelter's research showed.

"Teacher absences therefore join other characteristics of teachers that are distributed unequally across schools and should therefore be included in discussions of equity in the provision of public schooling," Clotfelter concluded.

"That was the most troubling point," the economist told GateHouse Media. "It's one of the ways in which the schools were not equal. ... You want those absences to be as small as possible, but you'd also hope that they wouldn't be correlated to the income of the students."

The media company's analysis of substitute teacher data showed the same disturbing trend: Districts with higher percentages of students receiving free and reduced-price lunch also more frequently use substitute teachers.

Academics suffer

Teaching remains one of the few licensed professions in most states where a person without a teaching license can fill-in for a day or longer if the need arises.

"You can't replicate what happens on a normal day with a normal teacher with a sub, and it's unique to this profession, this industry to do that," said Matt Vosberg, deputy superintendent of the Rockford School District in Illinois.

"If a policeman calls in sick, they don't call someone who isn't a policeman to come in and do that for a day, do they? Firefighter or police officers, they bring in their own to sub because they have the staffing to do that. ... We don't have that in education. It would be nice if we did."

The work by researchers interviewed by GateHouse Media showed that much of the instructional loss that results from the use of substitute teacher lies in the disruption. Students become familiar with a teacher's expectations and style. They tend to behave differently or have a difficult time learning from others.

“It’s a tough job,” said Jay Larson, an academy coach at Auburn High School in Rockford, Illinois. “You come in every day not knowing what you’re going to do.”

Subs rise to the challenge in various ways.

On a recent visit to classrooms at Auburn where subs were in charge — one sub taught a math lesson with another teacher to a room of attentive students, one wrote a handful of library passes and chatted with students about sports and another read definitions from a dictionary as students guessed the word.

“The joke around teaching is it’s always harder to be gone than it is to come to school,” said geography and history teacher Rebecca Roth. “It’s easier to be at school sick than it is to relinquish control for a day whether it’s because you’re sick or because you have to be gone for a training. It’s stressful to not be in your classroom and to put that trust in someone else to take care of your kids for the day.”

Changing methods, culture

While most school districts face similar funding challenges, some are striving to do substitute teaching differently.

Some are hiring full-time subs assigned to particular building. This allows “subs” to be part of the school’s staff, to get to know the students and learn the culture of the building as they float from class to class.

JP Toldo of Rockford is a freshman mentor specialist. Last year, he was a building support specialist, otherwise known as a full-time sub, assigned to Auburn High School. Toldo said he saw many advantages to being a full-time sub in the same building every day. In many ways, he said, it put him on the same level as classroom teachers. “You’re not just a random sub, not just a fill-in for the day,” Toldo said.

Some schools will fill teacher absences by letting other teachers in the building “pick up” the class during scheduled planning periods. The drawback, educators say, is the teacher is losing a planning period that helps them perform their best during their regular classes. At the elementary level, some schools will take a class of children and split them up to spend the day with other teachers in the same grade.

Other districts are offering higher pay to attract higher quality subs and more of them. Some districts also are increasing efforts to minimize teacher absences and trying to change their district’s culture toward absenteeism.

“We’re not saying districts should be telling teachers to not get sick,” Jacobs said. “By and large, teacher attendance is very good. We absolutely don’t want to give the impression that teachers across the country are sitting home with their feet up while their kids are sitting with substitutes. ... Although, there are clearly districts with higher than average absenteeism and higher chronic absenteeism.”