

Seitsinger plan would hike pay of substitutes

By Anna Maria Lemoine Sun staff writer

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WESTERLY CT— Margo Douglas, a 2015 graduate of Westerly High School, is barely a week into a substitute paraprofessional gig in the Stonington Public Schools system.

And she loves it.

“I just finished my first year of college, and I knew there were about three weeks until schools were done,” said Douglas, who attends Sacred Heart University in Fairfield, Conn. “I’ve always enjoyed working with children. So I decided to be a sub.

“Every day is different, and when you walk into a room at least one of the children always welcomes you.”

Substitute teachers and paraprofessionals like Douglas are in high demand — across the country and in local school districts.

At a time when teachers are increasingly being pulled out of classrooms to receive training, write curriculum or attend meetings, the number of qualified substitutes has dwindled.

Westerly Superintendent Roy Seitsinger Jr. said his district has struggled to maintain a substitute pool large enough to meet the need. And when the supply of substitutes doesn’t meet the demand, he said other teachers or administrators are asked to cover classes, and in more difficult times “we have to split up classes.”

“Unlike other jobs where work waits for the return of an absent employee or another line worker can step in, when teachers are absent the students still show up and there is a specific skill set required,” Seitsinger said. “The class must go on.

“Thus, competent teacher subs are needed.”

Seitsinger addressed the shortage last week during the School Committee meeting and presented a plan that, if approved, could attract and keep more substitutes: he wants to raise the per diem rate the district pays and revise the step program for substitutes, who receive no additional benefits.

“Our goal is to strike the right manner of compensation, develop loyalty, increase the sub fill rate, and sustain a pathway for possible employment for outstanding substitutes,” Seitsinger said. “We will take the guidance of the School Committee and integrate suggestions and bring forward a final plan to the committee in the near future.”

A trend

Local district officials said the shortage of substitutes is a trend that has been growing over the last few years, and several factors have likely contributed to the deficit: a pay rate that hasn’t changed and declining enrollments that leave fewer opportunities for substitutes to gain full-time employment.

The Stonington Board of Education considered raising the district’s daily rate for substitutes earlier this year before ultimately putting the idea on hold, while Barry Ricci, Chariho’s superintendent of schools, said his district will pay substitutes more beginning next year to alleviate the shortage he’s seen.

“Yes, sometimes and definitely in specific subjects,” Ricci said of the substitute shortage. “That’s one of the reasons we raised our daily rate.”

The Westerly district has allocated \$731,486 for substitute teachers, which includes long-term substitutes.

Another \$220,317 has been allocated for substitute paraprofessionals, and \$141,178 goes to substitutes for custodians.

The district, which employs about 300 teachers at various levels and nearly 300 more full-time and part-time employees, keeps an active substitute list of about 150. But many of those substitutes are on other districts’ lists, Deborah Kopech, Westerly Public Schools’ human resources coordinator, said, “so we’re competing against others to fill available openings.”

Kopech said the district uses a technology called Aesop, an Internet and phone-based program in which all registered substitutes are enrolled. A sub may be enrolled in Aesop for any school district that uses the program — and there are many that do so in Rhode Island.

Teachers and/or administrators will request a substitute teacher via Aesop as far in advance as possible. Registered substitutes, in turn, can access the program to sign up for a vacancy.

“If a position is unfilled by 5:30 a.m. the morning the sub is needed, the Aesop program robo-calls active subs for placement,” Kopech said. “When our school admin assistants get in, they verify whether or not their school’s sub requirements have been met and if not, they will call substitutes seeking someone to fill in.”

Added Seitsinger: “Even though we keep an active sub list of about 150, sometimes we run into problems.”

The solutions

Seitsinger's first solution is to raise the daily rate from \$75 to \$80 for 2016-17. Chariho is raising its rate to \$85, and some southern-tier districts already pay substitutes \$85.

In Westerly, long-term substitutes already receive a per diem rate of at least \$100, and substitutes working more than 135 days are on a per diem based on the Westerly Teachers Association salary steps.

A step is determined by the teacher's annual length of service in the school district.

Seitsinger also wants to revise the step plan so that when a substitute works 90 days, the step automatically increases by one-half step, or 1.025 percent, of the previous step. At the start of each school year, rather than reverting to the \$80 starting rate, the substitute would begin on the last step achieved.

"By providing staff in the substitute pool with a scheduled increase, the retention of substitutes should increase," Seitsinger wrote in his presentation. "By implementing this modification, Westerly Public Schools will align with state expectations."

David Patten, chairman of the School Committee, said the committee is reviewing data on the factors that drive the use of substitutes.

"They are needed to cover assignments when the classroom teacher is out for a variety of reasons, such as illness, meeting with parents and many other valid reasons," Patten said. "Substitute teachers provide for continuity in the classroom and ensure that students make progress on the primary teacher's academic plan."

"I support paying substitute teachers a competitive wage, but also minimizing the frequency and duration the primary teachers are out of the classroom."

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