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ABSTRACT

This study examined the extent to which Ohio school districts had implemented several policy and procedure recommendations in order to address the problem of perennial substitute teacher shortage. Surveys of district superintendents, who had completed a questionnaire on substitute teacher policy and procedures 3 years before, examined: district size and wealth; incentives (pay, full-time opportunities, and climate); application and interview criteria; performance evaluation; expectations and availability of support and material; professional development opportunities; and teacher absences and limitations on professional development opportunities for regular teachers. Results indicated that the substitute dilemma had improved only marginally since the previous study. Districts had made some efforts to increase pay. Most districts reported attempting to standardize the contents of substitute handbooks and availability of classroom materials. Overall, substitute teachers were not provided professional development, a thorough evaluation, or grooming for full-time job openings. There were some efforts to reward substitutes by setting up more well-defined employment tracks to encourage work toward permanent positions. Districts only marginally made substitutes feel valued as part of the teaching-learning team. The scarcity of substitute teachers caused school districts to develop creative strategies to obtain substitutes. (SM)

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The vexing problem of perennial substitute teacher shortage in Ohio

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Paper presented at the Midwestern Educational Research Association Annual Conference,
Chicago, October 13-16, 1999.

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The vexing problem of perennial substitute teacher shortage in Ohio

The perennial shortage of substitute teachers is one of the more vexing problems faced by school administrators. Frequent absences of teachers and a host of short-term replacements tend to disrupt learning. A lack of continuity in the classroom tends to lessen the effectiveness of the learning process. Since a goal of all school districts is to provide a good educational program administrators and school board members are critically examining the quality of their substitute teacher program.

To evaluate the seriousness of the problem in 1995, we conducted a survey of substitute teacher policy and procedures. Then a set of suggestions was proposed to improve the quality of substitute teachers. The results of that study were made public and responses from around the country were received. The current study is a follow-up to determine if school district practices have changed and if the changes have had an effect on the problem.

Three years ago, our study (Griswold and Hughes, 1997) of 115 superintendents, randomly sampled from the 611 Ohio school districts, supported the conventional wisdom that a shortage of qualified substitute teachers existed in Ohio. The shortage appeared related to two factors: district policy and procedures, and increasing professional development demands for regular teachers to be out of the classroom. Lack of professional recognition conveyed through recruitment, school support, incentives and status were rooted in the first factor. The second factor was a result of the large increase in school improvement efforts statewide and the need to free teachers for the necessary professional development.

Since then there has been a tremendous increase in the number of school improvement

activities requiring professional development of teachers. Furthermore, the new Ohio school standards mandate that licensed educators must participate in continuous professional development. Districts must have professional development plans for all teachers. These requirements will require more substitute teachers. Like the teachers, their temporary replacements should be qualified and should receive appropriate professional support and remuneration. One cannot expect improved instruction for our students, when teachers, absent for the very purpose of improving their instruction, are replaced with unqualified or inadequately supported substitute teachers. Furthermore, professional development during the school day should not be jeopardized because adequate numbers of replacements are not available.

We found that the importance of a substitute's teaching, as measured by the support and training received to be disappointing. Substitutes were not considered part of the regular teacher bargaining unit. Few districts provided both a handbook and orientation. Once in the school, substitute teacher support was limited to the principal checking on the classroom and the substitute being told how to contact the office. Few districts have formal procedures where teachers check in on the substitute or are assigned mentors. Substitutes followed the teacher's regular plan, but would not find more support than lesson plans, seating charts, school schedule, or class procedures. Plainly, support for effective instruction among substitutes was limited.

Using the limited literature (Augustin, 1987; Cannon, 1984; Kaufman and Hunter, 1991; Koehlling, 1983; Matranga, Hill, and Noonan, 1995; Purvis and Garvey, 1993) available and our research conclusions, we offered some recommendations. Our general recommendation was to include in district policy and school improvement plan the following elements: recruitment strategies, guidance and support activities, and staff development for substitute teachers.

Specifically, we encouraged school districts to augment their policy and procedures in ten areas to increase the number and skills of substitute teachers.

Now, after three years, we wanted to learn to what extent conclusions and recommendations we made in 1997 (Griswold and Hughes) were adopted by Ohio school districts. Our objective was to survey the same random sample of superintendents and ask them to respond to questions derived from our ten recommendations.

Method

A 15-item questionnaire was constructed to measure a district's changes in policy and procedures toward substitute teachers. The questionnaire addressed several research issues:

1. District size and wealth.
2. Incentives in terms of pay, full-time opportunities, and general climate.
3. Application and interview criteria, and performance evaluation.
4. Expectations and availability of support and material.
5. Professional development opportunity.
6. Teacher absences and limitations on professional development opportunities for regular teachers.

The same one hundred and forty district superintendents used in the first study (from the 611 state total) were mailed questionnaires, yielding a 61% return rate. To ensure comparability among the 85 who responded to the current 1998 survey and the 115 that responded to the 1995 survey, three of the survey questions were analyzed. The reported frequencies of size of the district in terms of pupils were not statistically different between the two surveys. The frequencies of location (rural, small city, suburban, and urban) were not different. The

statistically different between surveys ($\chi^2 = 27.35$, $df = 3$, $p < .0001$), with greater expenditure reported in the 1998 survey. However, after three years, districts' expenses and revenues would be expected to rise.

Results

The results are organized in the same sequence as the questions appear in the survey. The demographic information is first. Most districts contained more than 1,000 students. Twenty-seven reported student numbers greater than 2,999. A majority of districts were considered rural (56.6%). The urban districts were the minority (7.1%). The small school and suburban districts were each about 18%. Per pupil expenditure exceeded \$5,000 for the majority (58%). Only 7 percent were less than \$4,000.

We learned that 77.6% of the responding districts reported "well-defined employment tracks that allow substitutes to work toward permanent positions." Only 22 chose to explain their "yes." There were four distinct categories of explanations. Districts make it a practice to hire qualified substitutes for regular teaching positions. Substitute teachers are interviewed for teaching positions. Substitutes are included as a part of the pool of eligible candidates for regular positions. Or the district merely informs substitutes of available positions.

When asked "How do you make substitutes feel valued and part of the teaching-learning team?", 60% offered an explanation. We infer that the other 40% could not provide a specific strategy. The most common practice is to include substitutes in professional development and/or curriculum planning efforts. Others listed the use of a district substitute teacher handbook, although few are comprehensive documents (cf. Hill, 1999). Some districts furnish support to the substitute in the form of a mentor who maintains personal contact.

Fewer districts provide school orientation programs or specific training related to the substitute assignment. The last category was assurance that lesson plans, materials, student activities, seating charts are available for the substitute teachers.

An "increase in substitute teachers per diem rate" was reported by 77.4%. Using the Chi square statistic, (χ^2) a relationship was discovered between an "increase" and the demographics (urban, rural, etc.) or per pupil expenditure. Among these 77.4%, nearly half were in the \$60-69 range whereas in 1995 only 19% fell in this category. More than 21% were in the \$70-79 category, whereas in 1995 there were not quite 4%. Only 4.6% gave substitutes a per diem in excess of \$80.

We asked superintendents if they had "begun a permanent, full time substitute policy." When compared to the 1995 results, twice as many said yes - 16.7%. Nevertheless, 69% said no and only 14.3% were considering the possibility. A statistically significant relationship between the expenditure and the permanent substitute category was evident ($\chi^2 = 14.61, df = 6, p = .03$): the wealthier districts tended to have more permanent substitutes than the poorer districts.

In the first study of shortages superintendents reported difficulty locating substitutes. As a result, we wanted to know if districts "changed your application and interview process to include specific criteria for substitutes?" We found that 96.5% said no. There were few written explanations to this question. Only one school district stated that the interview process for substitutes was equivalent to that of a regular teacher.

Reference was made in the present study to the use of handbooks for substitutes. In the first study 80% reported that the district had one that was shared with the substitute. So we asked the superintendents if they "improved the substitute teacher handbook?" Less than half

(40.7%) said they had. Among this group, 94% contained maps of the school, 91% listed the job expectations, 78% included a school calendar, 75% contained appropriated administrative forms, 69% included classroom management suggestions, and 66% listed the faculty. We found that changes tended to be made more by urban and suburban schools than rural or small city schools ($\chi^2 = 18.96, df = 3, p < .0005$). No relationship was found between changes and per pupil expenditure.

The need for quality of substitute teachers as well as quantity was a concern. However, we found that 67% of the superintendents have not “begun a professional development program for substitute teachers.” This seems cause for concern since Ohio standards require local professional development plans for teachers. In their written responses, several districts reported that a skill program was provided, often by the regional Educational Service Center. Only three districts reported that substitute teachers were included in regular school staff development activities and that school orientation programs were provided.

A large percentage of the districts “have made the following a part of their substitute teachers program.” They require lesson plans (95%) and seating charts (88%) from the regular teacher. They provide procedures to report disciplinary problems (88%) and a schedule of classes (94%). They make supplies and materials accessible (64%). A few specific comments were made to this question: principals provide support and help with discipline problems, and one provides a free lunch.

In 1995, we learned that districts rely primarily on informal evaluation methods (observation of the substitute teacher). Only 12.4% of the districts had formal documentation and conferences. In our recent study, not too much seems to have changed. Observation by the

principal is still the evaluation of choice (45.9%). Sometimes a formal report is created by the principal (20%) and placed in the substitute's personnel file (10.6%). Seldom is student opinion used (3.5%) and few require a conference with the principal (6%). The common alternative strategies offered in response to the question were for the regular teacher to evaluate the substitute on return to the classroom. We can only assume that this evaluation is based upon achievement of the objectives left by the teacher and possibly students' reactions.

The shortage of substitutes raised concerns about limiting professional development. So we asked superintendents "if you have limited teacher participation in professional development activities that require their absence from the classroom?" A surprising 52% said yes. And there was no relationship between the response and district size or expenditures. Nearly half of those that responded yes made a written comment emphasizing the need to limit professional development during the day.

Substitute teacher shortages are related to teacher absences. When asked, "Do you note excessive teacher absences in their individual evaluations?", 56% reported a yes and half of those noted an amount. The average number of days that was considered excessive was 10.8 (sd = 5.02). Several districts reported that excessiveness depends on the situation or determination made by the principal.

Finally we wanted to know "what other changes have you initiated to reduce the substitute teacher shortage?" Nearly 59% noted changes. Districts actively recruit substitutes from the ranks of persons with non-teaching major college degrees. Some indicate a more aggressive recruiting stance. Substitute pay has increased, although only 4.6% of the reported per diem rate exceed \$79. One district pays for unused leave days. And regrettably, districts again report that

professional development activities have been curtailed.

Discussion

The results of our study are disheartening. The substitute dilemma has improved only marginally since our study three years ago. School districts have made some efforts to increase pay. Most districts reported they attempted to standardize the contents of substitute handbooks and availability of classroom materials. With these few exceptions, the results suggest that the substitute teacher is not provided professional development, a thorough evaluation, and nor grooming for full-time job openings.

We noticed some effort to reward substitute teachers by setting up more well defined employment tracks to encourage work toward permanent positions. However, districts do not place great value on their experience when considering applicants for full time positions. Districts should continue to work toward developing written policy that prepares qualified substitute teachers for vacant teaching positions.

Beyond the basic requirements, districts only marginally make substitutes feel as a valued part of the teaching-learning team. Beyond the absolute essential information and materials, substitutes were seldom embraced as real teachers with access to professional development and clinical coaching or mentoring.

While there has been an increase in the per diem rate of substitute teachers in many districts, they are payed far below the daily rate of beginning teachers. If school districts are to expect substitutes to have the skills and education to take the place of a regular teacher, then the substitute teachers must be adequately compensated.

With the need for quality substitute teachers escalating, districts must consider the use of

permanent, full-time substitutes. While there is an indication that districts are moving in this direction, more needs to be done. To gain a more dependable, professional group of substitutes, districts should create a category of substitute teacher who is on the regular school payroll. When not needed for substitute duties, they could engage in curriculum development or assist with district projects.

We are most perplexed with the continued report that hiring practices or performance evaluations for substitute teachers are so casual and limited. Few districts conduct thorough interviews for hiring. Evaluations are frequently informal. Casual observations are made by a principal. Seldom are post-teaching conferences held. Neither the interviewing nor the evaluation is designed to improve the instruction of these critical replacement teachers. We are left with the feeling that districts are satisfied with the 'baby-sitting' role and do not want to enhance the professional stature of substitute teachers.

Furthermore, professional development programs for substitute teachers are limited. With the exception of the standard orientation to the district and the building, few districts make a special effort to provide focused programs for substitute teachers. Even fewer districts include substitutes in district-wide professional development efforts.

The scarcity of substitute teachers has caused school districts to develop creative strategies to obtain substitute candidates. The most common strategy is to recruit non-teaching major graduates, assisting them with the substitute licensure process. While the strategy helps increase the number of substitutes, the quality of preparation must be questioned. One might think that a less creative strategy, but perhaps more successful, would be to simply pay more, guarantee eligibility for full time positions, support them in their professional development, and

provide them with constructive feedback on their teaching.

Conclusions

The results of the study reconfirm the serious educational concern with the shortage of substitute teachers and the continued perception that they are second-class educational citizens. We find it amazing that essentially no one denies that the problem is great . . . yet very little is done. Substitute teachers are not compensated equitably, they have little opportunity to improve their teaching, they receive minimal feedback from other educators, they are not included in professional development activities for regular teachers, and if they are good there is no guarantee they will get full time teaching. All this comes at a time when the performance standards of students are being increased and regular teachers are required to engage in better planned professional development. On the average, students spend eight days each school year with a substitute teacher. How can parents, educators, school board members, and legislators be satisfied with the status quo for substitute teachers, when more is expected from students and teachers?

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Note. A complete technical report, including the survey instrument, is available from the first author at ICL-17, Ashland University, 401 College Ave, Ashland, Ohio 44805.

APPENDIX : 1997 Questionnaire

Dear Superintendent,

Three years ago we surveyed a sample of Ohio school superintendents on the shortage of qualified substitute teachers. We reported our results in the May 1997 issue of the *Ohio School Boards Assoc. Journal*. The results supported the conventional wisdom that a shortage of qualified substitute teachers exists across all sizes of school districts in Ohio. Furthermore, the shortage appears related to two factors: district policy and procedures, and increasing professional development demands for regular teachers to be out of the classroom. Finally, we offered a brief list of recommendations for personnel policy and school improvement planning.

This is a follow-up survey to determine the steps districts may have taken to address the substitute shortage. Please take the necessary fifteen minutes or so to respond. Responses should reflect district-wide practices. After completing the survey, please place it in the envelope and return it to us.

Thank you in advance for taking the time to complete the survey. You are assured of anonymity. As before, we hope to make a summary of our results available through a state organization or publication.

Sincerely,

Philip A. Griswold, EdD

William Hughes, PhD

Change in Policy and Procedures Addressing the Substitute Teacher Shortage

Please place a checkmark in the spaces corresponding to your choice.

Section A: Background Information.

1. What is an estimate of the size of the school district (i.e., ADM)?

less than 999 1,000-2,999 3,000-5,000 >5,000

2. How would you classify your school district?

Urban Suburban Small city Rural

3. Estimate your district's per pupil expenditure last year?

\$3,000-3,999 \$4,000-4,999 \$5,000-6,000 >\$6,000

Section B: Change in policy and procedures for substitute teachers in the past three years.

4. Are there well-defined employment tracks that allow substitutes to work toward permanent positions?

No Yes Explain _____

5. How do you make substitutes feel valued and part of the teaching-learning team. Explain.

6. Have you increased substitute teachers per diem rate:

No Yes If yes, from what _____ to what _____?

7. Have you begun a permanent, full time substitute policy?

Yes No We are considering the possibility.

8. Have you changed your application and interview process to include specific criteria for substitutes?

No Yes Explain _____

9. Have you improved your substitute teacher handbook?

No Yes *If yes, does it include:*

Maps of the school Copy of the school calendar List of faculty and administrative staff

Copies of forms to be filled out by substitute teacher, regular teacher, and administrator.

Description of the expectations for the substitute. Suggestions for effective classroom management.

10. Have you begun a professional development program for substitute teachers?

No Yes Explain _____

11. Have you made any of the following a part of your substitute teacher program?

Organized lesson plans are required of the regular teacher.

Clear directions are provided to report discipline problems.

An up-to-date seating chart is available.

A current schedule of classes is provided.

Classroom supplies and materials are accessible and linked to the lesson plans.

Other. Explain _____

12. A formal evaluation system for substitutes is in place, containing one or more of the following:

Principal's observation Student opinion Principal/substitute conference

Formal report prepared by the principal Report is shared and placed in substitute's file.

Other. Explain _____

13. Have you limited teacher participation in professional development activities that requires their absence from the classroom?

No Yes Explain _____

14. Do you note excessive teacher absences in their individual evaluations?

No Yes (Indicate what is excessive _____)

15. What other changes have you initiated to reduce the substitute teacher shortage?

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