



No Substitute for a Teacher

**Adults'
absences
shortchange
students**

My son had a new degree and a nine-month unpaid gap in his training as a Marine Corps lieutenant. Please don't fill it with a job at a liquor warehouse, I asked.

Instead, he became a substitute teacher.

In the college town where he was living, an astonishing 47 percent of the school district's 721 teachers were absent more than 10 days during the school year, according to data the district reported to the U.S. Department of Education for a 2009–10 study. That number rose to 61 percent in an elementary school with one of the district's highest percentages of black, Hispanic, and low-income children.

Even at that, the district's absences don't appear to be record setting. U.S. teachers take off an average of 9.4 days (roughly 1 day per month) each during a typical 180-day school year. By that estimate, the average child has substitute teachers for more than six months of his school career.

Those absences provided full-time employment for my son. With a month-old bachelor's degree, he taught history and Spanish, his majors; calculus and literature; 2nd and 4th grades (after his second day on the job, the district asked him to take the 2nd-grade class for the rest of the year); tennis (no, he doesn't play); and gym to a class of severely disabled high schoolers. Once, he worked as a secretary at the alternative school; none of the four teachers assigned to the school showed up that day.

The district didn't pay much: \$60 a day. But it also didn't ask much in the way of credentials: no teaching certification, teacher education classes, or training beyond

By JUNE KRONHOLZ



a three-hour orientation that focused mainly on administrative details like time sheets. That isn't unusual either: in some of the country's larger school districts—including Maryland's Baltimore County, Florida's Hillsborough County, Georgia's Cobb County, and Colorado's Jefferson County—substitutes need only a high-school GED.

My son taught a high-school unit on World War II, his intellectual passion. But most often, teachers left behind worksheets, quizzes, and videos for him to monitor, amounting to what University of Washington professor Marguerite Roza calls "a lost day for most kids, regardless of the qualifications of the sub." Indeed, many schools are looking for someone just to keep order rather than to teach differential equations.

"A lot of times, principals are just praying for basic safety," said Raegen T. Miller, who has studied teacher absenteeism as associate director of education research at the Center for American Progress and as part of a Harvard University team.

No problem there: my son is, after all, a Marine.

Counting the Days

The education department reported after the 2003–04 school year that 5.3 percent of U.S. teachers are absent on any given day, and that's still the number most researchers use. But districts account for absences differently: some would count the tennis coach absent if he left his gym classes in the hands of a sub to attend an out-of-town tournament with his team; others wouldn't. Some count professional development days when subs are hired to take the class; others don't.

The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics employs a weekly absence measure and reports that in 2011, nationwide, 3 percent of the workforce worked less than a 35-hour workweek because of absences. Among public-sector workers, rates were 3.9 for federal workers, 4.2 for state, and 3.6 for employees of local governments.

Geoffrey Smith, who studies substitute-teacher management and founded the Substitute Teaching Institute at Utah State University, says, "A lot doesn't get called in." Each of Utah's 42 school districts counts teacher absences differently, he told me, which means there's little consistency in the data. Still, he said his surveys suggest that between 8 and 10 percent of teachers are absent on any given day, and there's some anecdotal evidence on his side.

Last summer, for example, the Camden, New Jersey, school board outsourced its substitute hiring to a private vendor because the job was so onerous: between teachers calling in sick or on leave, the district needed to find subs for up to 40 percent of its teachers each day, it told the local newspaper. In a 2011 report for the Providence,

Rhode Island, school board, researchers at Brown University's Urban Education and Policy program found that the district's 1,321 teachers took off an average of 21 days each per school year.

In the education department's 2009–10 report—assembled by its Office for Civil Rights from surveys of 57,000 schools—on average, half the teachers in the 208 Rhode Island schools surveyed were absent more than 10 days during the year, surpassing teacher absences in Hawaii, Arkansas, Oregon, and New Mexico by only a whisker. Nationally, 36 percent of teachers were absent that often. And even in Utah, which reported the lowest absence rates to the department, 20 percent of teachers took off more than 10 days each school year.

Who are those teachers? Harvard researchers Raegen Miller, Richard Murnane, and John Willett studied a district they identified only as large, urban, and northern. Duke University researchers Charles Clotfelter, Helen Ladd, and Jacob Vigdor analyzed data from North Carolina schools. Both studies concluded that teachers in bigger schools were absent more often than those in smaller schools. Elementary-school teachers took off more time than did those in high school. Tenured teachers took off 3.7 more days than did those without tenure.

Teachers in traditional districts seem to take off more than those in charters. Using the education department's Office for Civil Rights data, Miller estimates that about 37 percent of teachers are absent more than 10 days at district elementary and middle schools compared to 22 percent at charters.

Female teachers under age 35 averaged 3.2 more absences each school year than did men. Teachers who had a master's degree or graduated from a competitive college took less time than those who didn't. And teachers in low-income schools were absent more often than those serving higher-income families. One in 4 middle schools in the Duke study were among those with the highest absence rates, but that dropped to 1 in 12 among middle schools serving the district's most affluent students.

The National Council on Teacher Quality, which maintains a database on collective-bargaining agreements in 113 large school districts, reports that contracts give their teachers, on average, 13.5 days of sick and personal leave per school year.

Teachers argue that they're absent as often as they are because they're subject to all kinds of infections from sniffly-nosed youngsters and to intense stress in tough schools. Teaching—and particularly elementary-school teaching—is still a majority-female occupation, and child care still falls overwhelmingly on mothers, they add. When a teacher's child is out with the flu, she may have little choice but to stay home, too.

But other research contends that teachers' frequent absences are driven by generous leave provisions in their contracts, which typically include time off for illness and personal choice and, in many cases, family deaths, voting, religious observation, union business, conferences, cancer screening, even driver's license renewal. The National Council on Teacher Quality (NCTQ), which maintains a database on collective-bargaining agreements in 113 large school districts, reports that the contracts give their teachers, on average, 13.5 days of sick and personal leave per school year.

In Columbus, Ohio, the contract allows teachers 20 paid days off, in addition to school holidays and summer breaks. Teachers have 21 days in Boston, 25 days in Hartford, and up to 28 days in Newark, according to NCTQ. By contrast, only 73 percent of private-sector employers provide any sick leave in addition to paid vacation, according to the U.S. Labor Department, and they offer an average of eight sick-leave days during a 12-month work year. In New York City, even substitutes qualify for sick days, one per month.

Teachers certainly are exposed to all manner of classroom germs, but there's also evidence that a lot of absences are discretionary. The Harvard study found that the highest percentage of absences at that northern, urban district were on Fridays, when 6.6 percent of teachers took off, providing themselves a three-day weekend. Only 4.9 percent took off Tuesdays. More than half the absences that the study examined were for "personal illness," and more than half of those were for only a day or two. Perhaps coincidentally, the district required a doctor's excuse for an absence of three days or more.

Substitutes typically earn less than \$100 a day. But even at that, Raegen Miller puts the cost of substitute teachers at \$4 billion a year, or about 1 percent of total K–12 spending. In Fairfax County, Virginia, whose 13,000 teachers are offered 11 days off a year, the district budgeted \$19 million for substitutes in 2012. Cleveland, Ohio, whose teachers may take 18 days off, is budgeting \$10.8 million for substitutes this year.

University of Washington's Marguerite Roza calculated what districts would save yearly on substitute pay if teachers took leave at the same rate as other professionals, that is, 3 days during a comparable 180-day year. Her conclusion: \$43 per pupil in savings, or about one-half percent of school budgets.

Cost to Learning

The costs are far more than just financial, of course. The Duke researchers found that being taught by a sub for 10 days a year has a larger effect on a child's math score than if he'd changed schools, and about half the size of the effect of poverty. Columbia researchers Mariesa Herrmann and Jonah Rockoff concluded that the effect on learning of using a substitute for even a day is greater than the effect of replacing an average teacher with a terrible one, that is, a teacher in the 10th percentile for math instruction and the 20th percentile in English instruction.

There's no research on how long that effect lasts. But because learning is cumulative, "you would expect that the effect would aggregate to a larger loss of achievement over an entire school career," Mariesa Herrmann told me. In other words, "A teacher not in a classroom is a missed opportunity for learning," says Kate Walsh, president of NCTQ.

Some of that learning loss comes from disruption to the classroom: subs don't know the kids, the classroom routine, the school culture. They have no skin in the game, nothing to win or lose if no one learns Chaucer. Classroom management breaks down. Miller told me that even janitors know when there's been a sub: "There's more crap on the floor."

Teachers often leave busywork behind, or no work at all. In math, particularly—where the roiling debate over how to teach basic computation continues—subs often are cautioned not to teach anything at all for fear of setting the class back. Given testing pressures and school-wide lesson planning, there's little time to reteach a lesson.

Then, too, districts set fairly low standards for their subs, although the weak economy and teacher layoffs seem to be bringing more certified teachers into the sub pool. Of the 113 large districts in the NCTQ's database, less than one-quarter require that subs hold any teaching credentials. Only 37 districts require a college degree; 1 in 11 asks for only a high-school diploma or GED.



Out of curiosity, I perused the Denver Public Schools “Substitute Teacher Handbook.” It told me subs can’t wear bedroom slippers to work, that they’re paid \$90.40 a day, and that they can ask for, but shouldn’t expect, an evaluation. It didn’t say anything about their qualifications to teach.

Carrots and Sticks

With school budgets strained and learning loss evident, I wondered why districts didn’t try to claw back some of the days they’ve granted their teachers for illness and personal leave. Miller has calculated the learning loss attributable to teacher absences to be equal to about 5 percent of the achievement gap between black and white students. “If you had an intervention that would close the gap that much, it would be worth doing, wouldn’t it?” he asked.

The problem, NCTQ’s Kate Walsh told me, is that teacher quality has been ignored as a reform issue until fairly recently. Now that the focus has shifted, superintendents have so many bigger issues to confront—teacher-evaluation systems, tenure, differential pay—that “you can understand why they don’t go after this benefit,” she said.

“This is small change” to most districts, Miller added—they’re facing budget gaps way larger than that. And the issue touches such a nerve with teacher groups that “there’s profound reluctance to get into it at the bargaining table,” he said. “It’s an entitlement.”

“You should have seen the hate mail I got” after publishing a recent report on teacher absences, Roza told me.

Instead, districts have been turning to incentives to keep teachers at their desks. Almost all districts allow teachers to accumulate unused sick and personal days, and to cash them out when they retire or leave the district. The Detroit schools paid out \$12.5 million for unused sick days in 2010–11, which was twice what it spent on subs. New York City employs hundreds of full-time subs who report daily to a “home” school and fill in where they’re needed. They provide some continuity

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for the school and soak up teachers who have been laid off by budget cuts or enrollment declines. Even so, says Columbia’s Herrmann, these “absent teacher reserves” account for only 10 to 15 percent of the teachers that New York needs every day.

But some districts, facing such huge eventual payouts, have begun capping the number of sick days teachers can accumulate, posing a use-’em-or-lose-’em dilemma for teachers. And for younger teachers, “in deciding whether to be absent, are you really thinking of your retirement?” Columbia’s Herrmann asked.

Researchers have proposed that districts pay teachers a bonus for the days they don’t take off, or give their schools the money that would have been spent on subs as a collective incentive, or set up a reward system for teachers with good attendance (the Columbia study found that only 3 percent of teachers had perfect attendance). The Duke researchers proposed increasing teacher salaries by \$400 a year and then charging teachers \$50 for each day they take off. They estimated that the scheme would reduce absences by about one day per teacher and largely pay for itself. (Among the arguments raised against the proposal: it would hit female teachers with children harder than it would hit men.)

Many private schools and some charters simply don’t hire subs. Colleagues fill in for absent teachers during their own nonteaching hours. That keeps the class on pace when, say, one 4th-grade social-studies teacher can fill in for another, especially since they’re likely to have drafted the lesson plan together. It also means that one teacher is imposing on another, which creates some accountability, or at least discomfort for the teacher calling in repeated excuses.

But union contracts often limit how many hours a public-school teacher must be in the classroom: that’s why a school may hire a substitute librarian rather than send everyone back to their homerooms when the full-time librarian is out. And some contracts require districts to pay their teachers to sub, usually at rates higher than they would pay a substitute. The Wichita district pays its own teachers \$20 an hour; a full-day sub earns \$99.

Research also shows that absences increase where districts install automated absence-management systems instead of

feature

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leaving the job to school secretaries. Teachers log onto the system's website to report they will be absent. Subs log onto the same site to choose the class they'll teach.

But districts are adopting the systems anyway, as school support staffs are slashed and technology becomes cheaper. Among the largest of the systems, privately owned Aesop is in 3,000 districts. Aesop claims on its website that it saves districts money: its "fill rate"—that is, the number of classrooms it fills with a sub—is so high that schools don't need to use more costly downtime teachers. The company adds that its data reports enable principals to track who's frequently absent and "to work with teachers" who are.

But the automated systems mean that teachers no longer have to talk to the principal, and perhaps explain that they're taking a day off for a wedding-gown fitting or an auto tune-up. The automated systems also give schools less control over who will fill their classrooms: schools still can call favorite subs, but when those aren't available, an opening is listed on the website and anyone on an approved list, including the GED holder, can claim chemistry class.

Researchers have found that teachers are absent more often when their fellow teachers are, too. That can suggest

there's an "absence culture" in the school, as in "heck, everyone else is doing it." It also suggests a struggling school, where teacher absences and student absences feed off one another until neither group shows up. Or it may suggest weak management and unhappy workers. "If you've worked in an effective organization, people show up. If you've worked in a dysfunctional organization, they take off," NCTQ's Walsh observed.

I wondered about that when I looked at the education department's 2009 report on absenteeism and paged to high-performing Montgomery County, Maryland. The district reported that only 6.8 percent of teachers were absent 10 or more days per year at one school with a high percentage of black, Hispanic, and low-income children. But at two other schools with similar demographics, 42 percent and 19.6 percent of teachers took off that much time.

I asked the district about that. Then I asked again. As in every district I asked about teacher absenteeism, no one answered.

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