

What to do about the substitute teacher shortage?

If you've ever struggled to find classroom coverage in an emergency, or been forced to give up lunch breaks or prep periods, or double up on classes to cover for a sick colleague, you know substitute teachers aren't a luxury; they're essential to keeping our schools open and operating effectively. Unfortunately, the shortage of these essential employees has reached crisis levels, and everyone is feeling the squeeze.

"Educators have been working tirelessly to close learning gaps and improve the mental health and well-being of their students during this pandemic," said PSEA President Rich Askey. "This crisis threatens to derail those efforts and push already overworked educators over the edge. When classrooms are doubled up or canceled, it hurts everyone – students, teachers, and school staff alike."

The numbers of both teachers and substitutes in Pennsylvania schools have been dropping for at least a decade. So while the problem is not new, the pandemic has clearly exacerbated it and increased the importance of finding real solutions. That's why PSEA is working on multiple fronts to help solve this problem.

Act 91

A new law gives schools more flexibility

PSEA worked closely with a bipartisan group of legislators and the Wolf Administration on the passage of House Bill 1647, which expands the pool of eligible individuals who can serve as substitutes. Gov. Wolf signed the bill into law as Act 91 in December.

Here is what Act 91 does to address the substitute teacher shortage:

Day-to-day substitutes can now fill in for up to 20 days for each absent educator, even if the substitute's cumulative

service exceeds 20 days. Previously, state regulations limited day-to-day substitute teachers to a maximum of 20 days in each curriculum area.

Educators with inactive certificates can now substitute for 180 days during the school year — up from 90 days under previous law.

Soon-to-be-college graduates who have completed all of their requirements except a PRAXIS exam can now serve as long-term substitutes — up from a maximum of 20 days for each absent educator under the previous law.

Student educators. For the 2021-22 and 2022-23 school years, Act 91 uncaps the number of days students enrolled in education programs may sub, while preserving existing limits during the individual's student teacher program.

Retired educators. For the 2021-22 and 2022-23 school years, school administrators will have the flexibility to call retirees (rather than first seeking non-retirees) to staff classrooms. The law still requires school employers to establish that an emergency exists due to an increase in workload or shortage of personnel.

"Classroom monitor" pilot program. For the 2021-22 and 2022-23 school years, Act 91 allows people with 60 college credits or paraprofessionals with at least three years of experience and current employment as a paraprofessional to fill in for teachers as "classroom monitors." These "classroom monitors" must be 25 years old, must complete training through an intermediate unit, and are allowed to oversee classrooms but not instruct students, plan lessons, create assignments, or grade assignments.

A PSEA task force will help find long-term solutions

One of the New Business Items approved during PSEA's December House of Delegates directed the Association to create a task force dedicated to finding solutions to the substitute teacher shortage. We put out the call for PSEA member volunteers to serve on the task force and got nearly 100 responses from members eager to join. As of press time, the final decision on the makeup of the task force was still pending.

Solutions that the task force generates will be presented to the PSEA Board of Directors for consideration. We look forward to the important work this task force will do, and we will bring you updates as we have them.

Subs wanted

To raise awareness about the substitute teacher shortage and try to recruit more Pennsylvanians to work as substitutes, PSEA has been talking to the media about this crisis and running a series of digital ads across the state.

Local association leaders have also been reminding administrators about the new options they have because of Act 91.

If you have friends or family members you think would make good substitutes, send them to psea.org/subswanted where they'll find information and links.

The push for better pay

One of the main lessons to come out of the pandemic is that if you want to find workers, you need to pay them better. This is an economic tactic that makes sense, and it can work for school districts that desperately need substitute teachers.

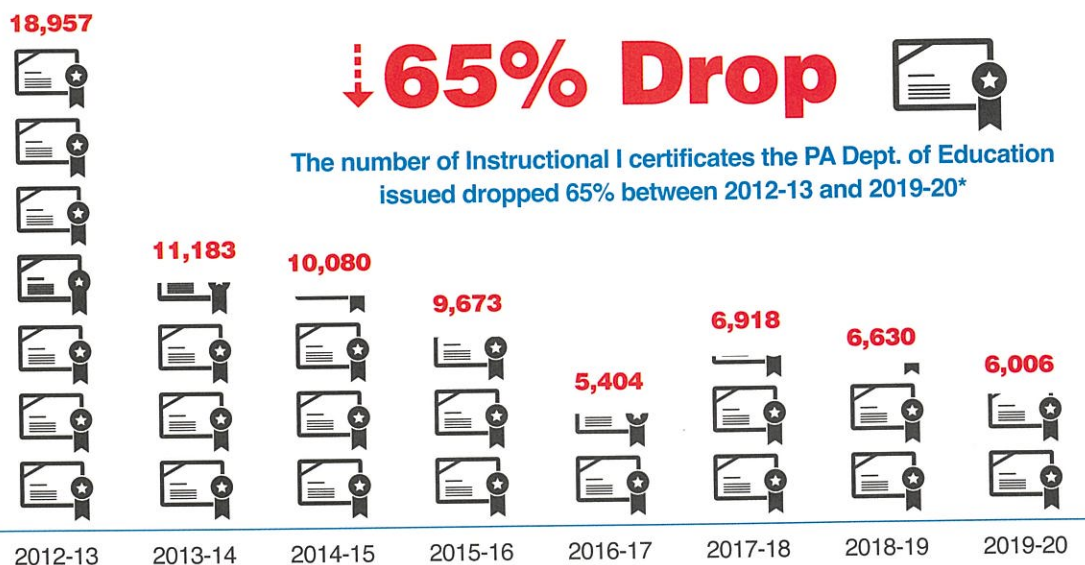
"One of the best ways to attract more substitutes is to pay them better. It's really that simple," Askey said. "Substitute teachers, like all our educators, deserve to be treated fairly and paid what they're worth. And as this pandemic has shown, our substitutes are worth an awful lot more than their current level of pay would suggest."

While Act 91 expands the pool of substitute teachers, better compensation is also needed to attract and retain more substitutes.

To that end, PSEA is urging school districts across Pennsylvania to apply for American Rescue Plan funding that can be used to increase daily pay for substitutes. Our state's K-12 schools have nearly \$5 billion in ARP funding available to them.

By expanding the pool of substitutes and paying them what they deserve for a hard day's work, we can help to address this crisis before it takes any further toll on student learning and the already heavy workload of our educators and support professionals.

Dramatic drop in teacher certifications drives shortage



* Source: Pennsylvania Department of Education Instructional I Certificates (In-State and Out-of-State) March 1, 2021

How has the substitute teacher shortage affected you?

“ Last year I had to take a short leave (Family Cares Act/FMLA) to be home with my son for his virtual learning because he is at higher risk for complications from COVID. And it was nearly impossible for admin to find a replacement. My students ended up having two different long-term substitute teachers within a span of about four months. I found this incredibly disruptive to their learning.



In addition, due to the sub shortage, most classes in my building have to be piled into the auditorium if the teacher is out. As a mask-optional district, this leads to concerns over superspreader events, because we can sometimes have 10 different classes in there at once.”

Christine Hanft, Secondary Ed. English Teacher, Council Rock SD

“ Being the only substitute coordinator in my district and being the person who is solely responsible for covering all employee absences, the substitute shortage affects me every day in some way. In the last six months, I have set up recruiting tables at our local sport events. The last one was the beginning of December at a basketball tournament, and I had not one person come to the table. I had door prizes, I posted signs, and I was giving away swag. Even with all these hardships, I managed to have coverage between 60 and 70 percent per day.



I make phone calls personally, and I do not just rely on Frontline to do the work. I work seven days a week, and placing coverage in classrooms is of utmost importance to me. There was a substitute shortage prior to COVID. I am pleased that COVID brought some light to the problem. However, it has been ongoing, and I believe it will continue without intervention.”

Jennifer Marmeleira, Substitute Coordinator/Secretary, Wallenpaupack Area SD

“ The substitute teacher shortage has been an ongoing issue but has certainly increased since the outbreak of COVID-19. At executive committee meetings for my local, I often hear how teachers lose their professional days (requested for the completion of IEPs/RRs or district-mandated assessing of students) at the last minute because there is no sub. This is especially frustrating after they’ve already prepared sub plans for the day.



Often teachers lose out on their prep time to cover their classes or classes of colleagues. While we are paid for our missed prep time, we would prefer the time, not the pay, to complete tasks on our never-ending to-do lists. The lack of substitutes plays a large role in the stress levels and burnout rates of the professionals who have dedicated their lives to the craft of teaching.”

Janette Heil, High School Special Education Teacher, Haverford SD

“The substitute shortage takes away my planning periods to cover other classes. This results in less contracted time to reach out to families and plan/prepare for upcoming lessons. When all available teachers are covering classes, some students have to be grouped together with other classes in the cafeteria. They work on independent assignments on their devices, and staff or administrators monitor the group. This interferes with the structure, procedures, and schedules that students need.”



Kellie-Ann Maute, Fourth grade Teacher, Central Greene SD

“I retired in June 2019 and jumped through all the application hoops to start subbing in my former district (Council Rock). I enjoyed seeing my friends/colleagues and the students. I was subbing on March 12, 2020. The schools closed on March 13 because of COVID. And, sadly, I have not been back. I cannot fathom risking my health to cover study halls of four classes of seventh graders in the auditorium, for \$105 (!), even though I know my services and skills are in great need. Among many other things, we need to reverse the maligning of educators if we hope to have a chance of getting more teachers and substitutes in our classrooms.”



Tina Spiegel, Mideastern Region-Retired

“At the beginning of the school year, I, as an Instructional Support Paraprofessional, had to fill in in the mornings for a week to get a second grade class situated until the teacher was able to Zoom in and start the lessons from home. While the teacher was home under quarantine, she was able to conduct the class each day without having to be there in person. However, there has to be a substitute teacher in person to supervise the class.



“We did not have the luxury at the time to have a building sub available or a fill-in from an outside agency fill the role. The dilemma here is that I can only be in the class for a set amount of time, and other support staff needs to be rotated in to cover. I also have my regular daily duties to fulfill along with assistance provided each morning for a week. This scenario plays out almost daily whenever there is a teacher, PCA, or support person out due to illness or quarantine.

“I am passionate about finding solutions to alleviate the stress placed on all in this predicament due to substitute shortages as this ultimately affects the children we are responsible for and the integrity of a proper education.”

Jason Pastuch, Instructional Support, Wallingford-Swarthmore C&M ESP

For more information visit

www.psea.org/sublegislation