

SCHOOLS SCRAMBLE AS SUB POOL SHRINKS

Subs

Shortage a bad sign for future teaching corps, but non-educators may fill gaps

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Substitute teaching has never been a glamorous job.

The pay is low and per diem, with no benefits. A 5 a.m. phone call often dictates where, or if, one will show up to work. And students have been known to make the classroom conditions interesting.

Just because a job is not glamorous, though, doesn't mean it is not important. A worsening shortage of substitute teachers over the past several years has given districts across Monroe County and New York a keener appreciation for reliable replacements.

"It's been a pretty acute situation for six or seven years," said Pat McCue, assistant superintendent for human resources in Rush-Henrietta. "It's definitely a regional issue. ... We're all competing in the same pool, and the pool is shrinking."

The issue is serious enough across the state to have attracted the notice of the Board of Regents. It is reviewing new regulations that would let districts more freely use non-educators as substitutes.

A major factor, according to both districts and teacher colleges, is a decline in people studying to become teachers in the first place. That could point to trouble ahead for the teaching profession in general.

The trend is not that districts need more substitutes than they

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used to, but rather that there are fewer people to call on to fill them.

Though districts agree the shortage is real, there is no good data to illustrate it. Not all districts track how many absences went unfilled, and they don't all necessarily agree on what constitutes an unfilled absence.

For example, when an absent teacher's schedule is covered by an administrator or by a platoon of other teachers on their free periods, some schools might consider it unfilled while others might not.

"That's the biggest problem, is there just aren't enough qualified people out there," Brockport Assistant Superintendent for Human Resources Jacob Reimer said. "(Districts) are looking at every possible way to build that pool."

'You grab anyone you can'

Students and parents may not spend much time worrying about how their schools find temporary replacements for teachers who are ill, in training or on leave. But the shortage often means displacing other

school employees from their primary jobs, which can have a ripple effect in other areas.

Statistics obtained through a series of Freedom of Information requests show there were about 146,000 teacher absences in Monroe County schools in the 2014-15 school year. That's an average of more than 800 openings each school day; more than a quarter of them were in the Rochester City School District.

Not all of those absences require a substitute teacher, but many do. In those cases, districts either assign a building substitute — a person whose full-time job is filling in for others — or go down a list of available at-large substitutes and hope one says yes.

Until recently, that seldom was a problem. It has become increasingly common, though, for districts to strike out on those rounds of pre-dawn phone calls. In those cases, the last resort is to reassign other staff in the building. That might mean teaching assistants, other teachers with free periods or building administrators. In some cases, two elementary school classes might be combined. “You grab anyone you can to make sure students are safe and instruction is happening,” McCue said.

While there are no good statistics on the number of unfilled teacher absences, local teaching certification programs report a distinct decrease in enrollment.

In 2006, Nazareth College awarded a combined 480 undergraduate and graduate teaching degrees. In 2015, the total had dropped to 213. SUNY Geneseo provided a different measure: the number of undergraduate and graduate applicants to its teaching program declined from 1,449 in 2010 to 626 in 2015. Officials there attributed the drop in part to public criticism of teachers and teachers unions in the greater ongoing debate over public education.

“This has been a time of a lot of discourse about public education ... and it has had a negative impact on discussions with young people about going into the teaching profession,” said Nazareth School of Education Dean Kate Daboll-Lavoie.

On the other hand, Geneseo reported an increase in the number of people training to teach special education or other specialties with pronounced labor shortages.

In a memo on the topic released earlier this year, the pro-reform National Council on Teacher Quality said the recent downturn in graduating teachers is a necessary corrective to an earlier supply boom, particularly in areas of low need, such as general education elementary school teachers.

“Whenever I talk to parents or students, we tell them they have to think about what the market will be like four years from now,” Geneseo Dean of Education Anjoo Sikka said. “All I can say is, the trend is an increased demand for teachers.”

John Baynes, president of the Fairport Educators Association, connected the teacher training issue explicitly to the substitute shortage: “Subbing is the gateway to the profession. If you have a shortage of subs, that speaks to a looming crisis for the profession.”

‘I feel I’m part of the district’

Until enrollment in teaching programs rebounds, districts are using a variety of measures to plug gaps. Those local strategies include:

» Staggering professional development and other scheduled activities to avoid having large numbers of

teachers out at the same time

» Hiring district substitutes who are guaranteed regular work in return for a commitment to be available

» Increasing recruitment efforts, both at job fairs and with retired teachers “The biggest thing is recruiting more qualified and capable people into the sub pool,” Reimer, of Brockport, said. “Every school district puts ads in every newspaper and publication, its website, everywhere.” Currently, people who are neither certified nor working toward certification only can work in one district for 40 days in a school year. The proposed regulation would extend that period to 90 days, or even an entire school year, as long as the district makes a good-faith effort to find a certified teacher and cannot do so.

In western Monroe County, the Hilton Central School District and the teaching program at the College at Brockport have joined together this year to create a program that benefits them both.

Their Educational Fellowship Program for graduate and advanced undergraduate students blends substitute teaching with the more supportive structure of student teaching. The teachersin- training cover for absent teachers as a regular sub would but also get more regular coaching and feedback. “From a traditional approach, they may be doing some of the work of what a sub would do, but the supports will be so much more significant,” Hilton Assistant Superintendent for Human Resources Scott Massie said.

Unlike student teachers, the Brockport teachers at Hilton get paid. They’re also guaranteed an interview if a full-time position opens up. Brockport graduate student Erin Moses is one of the handful of people participating in the program this year. She works most often in special-education classrooms and also helps with the yearbook club.

“I feel I’m part of the district, not just coming in one day and no one knows who I am,” she said. “Here, I walk down the halls and the kids scream, ‘Hey, Miss Moses!’ ” Hilton funds the program but expects to save money compared to what they normally spend on subs. The Brockport Central School District and Monroe-2 Orleans BOCES are joining the program in 2016-17. The Nazareth and Geneseo deans both said they are looking into more formal partnerships with local districts as well, suggesting a movement toward a more integrated experience for teachersin- training.

Jeannine Galusha moved to the Rochester area last year after having been a teacher in Vermont. She spent the first half of the school year substituting around the county before contracting with West Irondequoit to sub there two days a week, when she’s not at her part-time teaching job at St. Rita School in Webster. She hopes the experience will lead her to a fulltime position in West Irondequoit next year.

“Back in the day, a substitute teacher meant you’d watch a movie,” she said. “Now kids really need to continue their learning just as if the teacher were there. And I don’t know if there are a lot of good substitute teachers out there to do that.”

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Substitute teacher and Brockport graduate student Erin Moses of Hamlin works with students on chemistry. The Hilton Central School District is working with The College at Brockport to use its teacher-training students as substitute teachers.

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From left, Kate Daboll-Lavoie of Nazareth College; Patrick McCue, Rush-Henrietta Central School District; and Scott Massie, Hilton Central School District.