

Finding substitute teachers a challenge for New York school districts

Every day, handfuls of teachers across New York State miss school. When that happens, school districts struggle to find adequate replacements. A June 2019 NYSSBA survey found that 96% of superintendents had difficulty finding substitute teachers for the 2018-2019 school year.¹ Many indicated this has been a long-standing problem for both daily and long-term substitutes.

More than half of respondents (64%) said they had difficulty finding substitute teachers in all areas. Certain subjects were especially problematic: sciences (90%), math (82%), foreign languages (82%), special education (80%) and technology (74%).

When a substitute lacks a strong command of the subject matter or when no substitute is available, student learning is disrupted. This report examines the challenges school districts face in finding substitute teachers and what they can do to address these problems.



Factors involved in substitute teacher shortages

Data from the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Civil Rights show that from 2011 to 2015 (the first and last years for which data were available), roughly three in 10 teachers in New York were absent more than 10 days of the school year.²

In 2015, the New York State Education Department began collecting teacher attendance data from school districts and BOCES.³ In the 2016-17 school year, the average number of days New York teachers were absent was 9.7. Teachers who were chronically absent (out 18 or more days or one-tenth of a 180-day school year) missed 37.1 days on average. Sickness accounted for about two-thirds (66.3%) of all absences. Personal leave, maternity/paternity, bereavement and jury duty were other reasons teachers missed school.

The 2017-18 data **were nearly identical**.

To assess the extent to which statewide demand for substitute teachers is being met, BOCES district superintendents conducted a four-week study from January to February 2019. The study collected data on the number of absences in their regions, the number of substitutes requested and the number of requests that could be filled. These data show that fill rates vary significantly across the state, from a low of 59% in Westchester to a high of 94% in Saint Lawrence-Lewis. **The average fill rate was 81%.**⁴

Why is it difficult to find qualified replacements for teachers who miss instructional days? Based on data from NYSSBA's survey, there are several prominent factors:

- **A strong economy.** When the economy is strong, substitutes are scarcer because there are greater numbers of full-time jobs

▶ Substitute Teacher Shortage

96% of superintendents said their schools had difficulty finding substitute teachers over the past year.

▶ Hardest Subjects To Staff

The hardest positions to staff with substitutes tend to be math, foreign languages, special education, technology and the sciences.

▶ Teacher Attendance

New York teachers missed an average of about 10 school days in the 2016-17 and 2017-18 school years. Teachers are considered "chronically absent" when they miss at least 18 days in a school year. Chronically absent teachers missed an average of about 37 days in the 2016-17 and 2017-18 school years.

▶ Factors Contributing To Shortage

There are a number of reasons districts struggle to find substitutes. Student behavior, fewer qualified candidates and pay are just a few.

▶ Shortage Solutions

Districts have taken a creative approach to recruiting qualified substitutes such as using retired teachers, increasing pay rates and marketing.

¹ The survey was conducted May 28-June 18, 2019. A total of 660 superintendents across New York were invited to participate. A total of 195 responses were received — a rate of 30%. The survey has a margin of error of +/-5.9% and a confidence interval of 95%.

² U.S. Department of Education. Civil Rights Data Collection. Retrieved from <https://ocrdata.ed.gov/>.

³ <http://www.regents.nysed.gov/common/regents/files/HE%20-%20Substitute%20Teacher%20Demand%20and%20Supply.pdf>

⁴ <http://www.regents.nysed.gov/common/regents/files/HE%20-%20Substitute%20Teacher%20Demand%20and%20Supply.pdf>



available – both within and outside the classroom – of which potential substitutes can avail themselves.

- **Dwindling teacher ranks.** The number of people pursuing the teaching profession in New York has plummeted, shrinking the pool of potential subs. For example, enrollment in teacher certification programs throughout the State University of New York system dropped by 40% from 2011 to 2015.⁵

- **Financial concerns.** Low pay (roughly \$100 per day) and job-related costs such as fingerprinting can be a barrier for prospective substitute teachers.

- **Increasing pay rates.** The Milford school district in Otsego County offers certified subs an hourly rate equivalent to minimum wage plus \$4/hour. Uncertified subs earn minimum wage plus \$2/hour. Milford also started using social media (specifically Facebook) to advertise its pay rates and openings for substitutes. This approach has quadrupled the number of substitutes.

“Even in this very strong economy we are not finding difficulty in hiring substitutes,” said Superintendent Mark Place. “If we wanted to recruit the best, we figured we had to let everyone know our rates and get that information out widely.”⁷

in Broome County has worked closely with Binghamton University to run substitute teacher recruitment fairs on their campus for those who have a bachelor’s degree, but perhaps are in a master’s program and could sub during the day.⁹

At Jamestown Public Schools in Chautauque County, Director of Human Resources John Panebianco visits colleges and universities in western New York with teacher preparation programs. He conducts mock interviews, provides applications and resumé advice and promotes the school district. The district encourages university students in local teacher education programs to substitute in their schools during breaks and at the end of the spring semester. Those who do so are offered an interview in any opening they subsequently apply for.¹⁰

- **Employ permanent substitutes.** The Syosset school district on Long Island employs permanent substitutes, who perform other support roles when not needed to fill in for teachers.¹¹ The Romulus school district in Seneca County hired a full-time certified building substitute in 2017-18. That, in addition to using local community members as non-certified substitutes, has met the district’s needs about 98% of the time.¹²

- **BOCES calling services.** BOCES such as Monroe 2 have services that find substitutes for districts, alleviating individual school districts from the time and expense of doing it themselves.

A compilation of strategies used by school districts across the state may be found [here](#).

Conclusion

Continuity of instruction is vital to student achievement. When bringing substitute teachers into the classroom is necessary, disruptions to student learning may occur. School districts can minimize those disruptions by using creative ideas for ensuring they have a supply of qualified substitutes ready to step into the classroom.

Finding qualified substitute teachers is a challenge statewide. When a substitute lacks a strong command of the subject matter or when no substitute is available, student learning is disrupted.

- **Student behavior.** Some substitute teachers are either ill-equipped or unwilling to handle the behaviors and needs of students.

- **Location/geography.** Some locations are either unappealing or too remote to attract substitute teachers, limiting the pool of candidates.

- **Restrictions on non-certified teachers.** New York State regulations allow individuals who are not certified or pursuing teacher certification to be substitutes, but they are currently limited to 40 days during a school year.⁶

A compilation of factors gathered from NYSSBA’s survey may be found [here](#).

What are districts doing to alleviate the problem?

Given the challenges school districts face in finding substitute teachers, many have implemented creative solutions to fill those gaps. These include:

The Salamanca school district in Cattaraugus County increased sub pay rates of certified teachers from \$110/day to \$140/day and uncertified subs from \$85/day to \$110/day. According to Superintendent Robert Breidenstein, the frequency of sub shortages has significantly decreased.⁸

- **Using retired teachers.** Salamanca also increased sub pay rates for retired teachers from \$110/day to \$165/day and attracted retirees through a marketing campaign pinned to their eligibility to buy into the BOCES health insurance plan. The campaign illustrated that by subbing once per week, teachers could earn the equivalent of a full year of individual health insurance. By subbing twice weekly, they could earn the equivalent of family health insurance. The combination of the increased pay rate and marketing campaign has produced an abundance of retirees who sub regularly.

- **Partnering with colleges and universities.** The Union-Endicott school district

⁵ Lindsey Riback. Nov. 24, 2016. SUNY Shortage: Teaching programs plummet. Binghamton Press and Sun Bulletin. Retrieved from <https://www.pressconnects.com/story/news/local/new-york/2016/11/24/suny-shortage-teaching-programs-plummet/94348140/>.

⁶ Section 80-5.4 of the Commissioner’s regulations

⁷ Personal communication with Mark Place. May 28, 2019.

⁸ Personal communication with Robert Breidenstein. May 28, 2019.

⁹ Personal communication with Larry Dake. May 28, 2019.

¹⁰ Personal communication with Bret Apthorpe. May 29, 2019.

¹¹ Personal communication with Tom Rogers. May 29, 2019.

¹² Personal communication with Martin Rotz. May 28, 2019.