There is No Substitute: Michigan's Substitute Teacher Shortage

INFORMING THE DEBATE

MAPPR Policy Research Brief

Institute for Public Policy
and Social Research
MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY

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There is No Substitute: Michigan's Substitute Teacher Shortage

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Practically all public school districts depend on substitute teachers to fill in when regular classroom teachers are absent. And absent they are: A National Council on Teacher Quality report shows that public school teachers on average missed 11 school days per academic year (Joseph, Waymack, and Zielaski, 2014). Further, research indicates that teacher absences negatively influence student achievement (Clotfelter, Ladd, and Vigdor, 2007; Miller, Murnane, and Willet, 2007). Substitutes can serve as effective "educational bridges" to the continuation of instruction and promotion of learning in the absence of the regular teacher (National Education Association, 2017). But because schools cannot leave students unsupervised, they must somehow respond to the lack of substitutes on any given day—for example, by temporarily reassigning administrators or other certified staff, or by moving students around. This result not only disrupts school operations and increases district costs, but also adversely affects students and other school staff. Despite such chains of deleterious effects, research related to substitutes is scarce; research related to the substitute labor market scarcer still.

The state collects little data on substitute teachers, but what there is suggests that Michigan school districts use a relatively high number of substitute teachers, whose annual mean wage falls in the bottom fifty percent of all states (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2018). A large majority of districts rely on a private third-party provider (TPP) to maintain a pool of substitutes from which to draw. At least since late 2016, Michigan TPPs and districts began to report a substitute teacher shortage (Higgins, 2016). The leading TPP has used billboards to prominently advertise for substitutes, and its CEO has asserted that the overall substitute fill rate has declined from 95% in 2012 to 85% in 2016 (Higgins, 2016; see also Cook, K., 2017). The Michigan Department of Education (MDE) Critical Shortage List has for years included substitute teachers in all content areas and at all grade levels for multiple districts (Michigan Department of Education, 2019). Further, the Michigan Association of School Administrators (MASA) has made the substitute shortage (as well as teacher shortages more generally) a major policy priority. In 2018, the Michigan legislature enacted two statutes in response: one lowered the minimum educational qualification for substitutes from 90 to 60 credit hours (PA 2018, No. 236; see House Fiscal Agency, 2018b), the other continued to allow districts (but not TPPs) to employ qualified retirees without losing retirement benefits (PA 2018, No. 141; see House Fiscal Agency, 2018a). Yet, again, the research on substitute teaching to inform effective policymaking remains extremely limited.

This policy brief examines substitute teacher policies and practices in Michigan K-12 public school districts along multiple dimensions in order to explore the nature of the substitute labor market. More specifically, our research addresses these questions:

- How do districts experience and understand their current need, ongoing management, and available supply of substitute teachers?
- How have districts responded to their experiences and understandings of any "substitute crisis," and with what results?

- Given the perceived causes of any substitute shortage, what changes in substitute policies and practices might improve district responses and mitigate adverse effects?

To answer such questions, we partnered with the MASA to collect descriptive quantitative and qualitative data from school districts across Michigan. We gathered survey data from the superintendents (or central office designees) of MASA member districts, which we combined with district data obtained from the Center for Educational Performance and Information (CEPI). In addition, we interviewed survey respondents from randomly selected districts based on region (northern, eastern, central, western) and locale (city, suburban, town, rural). Finally, we conducted a focus group meeting of district central office representatives from constituent districts of three central Michigan Intermediate School Districts (ISDs).

Our data analyses yield several important features of the substitute teacher market, both as it operates across the state and as it varies by district context. Our principal findings include these:

- School district administrators report that the substitute shortage is very real, with the majority (64%) unable to find enough substitutes *multiple times a week*.
- This shortage affects every type of school district in every region of the state.
- The shortage has worsened over the last five years, with 86% reporting moderate or severe declines in the supply of substitutes.
- District leaders point to changes in the state retirement law, fewer graduates of teacher preparation programs, and better alternative careers as key contributors to the shrinking supply of substitutes.
- Recent changes to state substitute eligibility requirements (targeted to address the low supply) appears to have had little effect on the substitute shortage.

In light of our findings, we suggest that policymakers explore the following initiatives to address Michigan's substitute teacher labor market:

- Change the public employment retiree law to make it easier for retired teachers to work as substitutes.
- Improve district and state collection and reporting of substitute teacher data.
- Support district partnerships with teacher and paraprofessional (4-year and 2-year degree) training programs.
- Encourage substitute and teacher absence data sharing, analysis, and problem solving among local stakeholders.

OVERVIEW OF THE ISSUE

Research does little to inform substitute teacher policy because there is very little of it. Whether due to the dearth of usable data, or the perception of unimportance, rigorous studies are decidedly scarce (Abdal-Haqq, 1997; Damle, 2009; Ostapczuk, 1994). Aimed mainly at practitioners, most recent work tends toward the descriptive and/or prescriptive. Interestingly, studies seem clustered around periods of apparent shortages in teacher labor markets, including the mid-'80s (Currence, 1985; Rose, et al., 1987), turn of the millennium (Dorward, Hawkins, and Smith, 2000; Griswold, 2001; Rogers, 2001; Russo, 2001), and post-Great Recession (Gonzales, 2017; Iasevoki, 2017). Alongside these contextual facts is the widespread opinion that substitute teachers could, but largely don't, contribute to school success or student learning (Griswold and Hughes, 1999; Gonzales, 2017; Russo, 2001).

The subject matter of substitute teacher research varies in focus (see, e.g., Gershenson, 2012; Clifton and Rambaran, 1987).[i] In the context of a perceived shortage, only two studies attempted to determine the availability of substitute teachers (Dorward, et al., 2000; Griswold, 2001). Both were primarily interested in the impact of a shortage on rising professional development (PD) demands and vice versa.[ii]

Contemporary Substitute Shortage in Michigan

The education press in Michigan has recently highlighted a shortage of substitutes. On Christmas Day, 2016, the *Detroit Free Press* headlined "Wanted: Substitute teachers for Michigan classrooms," with a photograph of a recruiting billboard displayed by EDUStaff, the state's largest TPP (Higgins, 2016).[iii] The article reported a severe shortage of substitutes in Michigan (among other places), relying on an EDUStaff-provided statistic that the substitute fill rate had declined from 95% in 2012 to 85% in 2016. The article discussed the adverse effects of the shortage—disruption of school operations, harm to student instruction, as well as speculating on causes—changing substitute demographics, fewer entering teaching, and poor pay and benefits. It also cited EDUStaff's preferred state legislative solution: decrease the minimum number of college credit hours required to substitute teach from 90 to 60, the number of hours earned for a community college associate's degree (Higgins, 2016; see also Wagner, 2016). More news articles began appearing in the local Michigan press (Chambers, 2018; Cook, K., 2017, Cook, S., 2017; Scott, 2017), with the national *Education Week* picking up the story as well (Iasevoli, 2017). These articles elaborated many of the same points, and also pointed to the strong economy as a contributor,

Meanwhile, two State House bills began moving through the legislative process. The first (HB 4069) proposed to enact the 90 to 60 credit hour change in eligibility, the second (HB 4422) to extend a law permitting retired teachers to work as substitute teachers for districts directly (not through a TPP) without a reduction in retirement benefits (see Chambers, 2018; Dietzer, 2017; McVicar, 2017).[iv] The bills became law in 2018 (Public Act 2018, No. 141; Public Act 2018, No. 236). The legislative analysis of HB 4069 notes that both bills were "intended to address Michigan's ongoing teacher shortage. Reportedly,

[substitute] fill rates … have dropped from 95% in 2012 to 85% in 2015" (House Fiscal Agency, 2018b, p. 1; footnote omitted, linking to Cook, K., 2017).[v]

Research Method & Outcomes

In an effort to address the lack of usable research about the substitute shortage in Michigan, the research team employed three data collection techniques: a survey of Michigan district administrators, interviews with a random subset of survey respondents, and a focus group of district leaders. Because the data is from the perspective of school administrators, it necessarily neglects the role of substitutes, TPPs, and other stakeholders, and it lacks solid observable data. However, these findings should establish a basis for future research, as well as clarify the facts on the ground as district leaders understand them.

Survey Methods and Findings

The research team developed a series of survey questions about substitute staffing in Michigan. The questions fell into several groups of categories: information about the respondents, under what conditions substitutes were most needed, procedures for recruiting substitutes, and perceptions about the overall market for substitute teachers. These questions were piloted with a former school administrator and a small group of MASA members. After revisions, the survey questions were distributed via email links to the entire MASA membership, with an emphasis on school district superintendents. Several rounds of reminders were sent out, as well as additional follow-up requests to district leaders to ensure the state's largest districts were included in the study.

Survey responses were cleaned to eliminate duplicates and to restrict the sample to traditional public school districts. In some cases, there were responses from multiple personnel in the same district. Priority was placed on the responses from superintendents or their deputies (86% of responses). In instances where a school district leader wished to have certain sections filled out by another administrator (for example, an HR director), they were instructed to have the latter submit a new survey response. The responses were then merged by district, with non-superintendent responses used to fill in missing data.

Survey responses were then matched to CEPI demographic data, including socioeconomic status, race/ethnicity, type of district, enrollment, and region of the state. Districts were grouped into four quartiles by percent below the poverty line and percent Hispanic or non-white (0-25%, 25-50%, 50-75%, 75-100%). The CEPI classification for district type includes indicators for enrollment size (large, midsize, and small) and urban classification, or "locale" (city, rural, suburb, and town). The research team independently divided school districts into four regional groups: northern, western, central, and eastern.

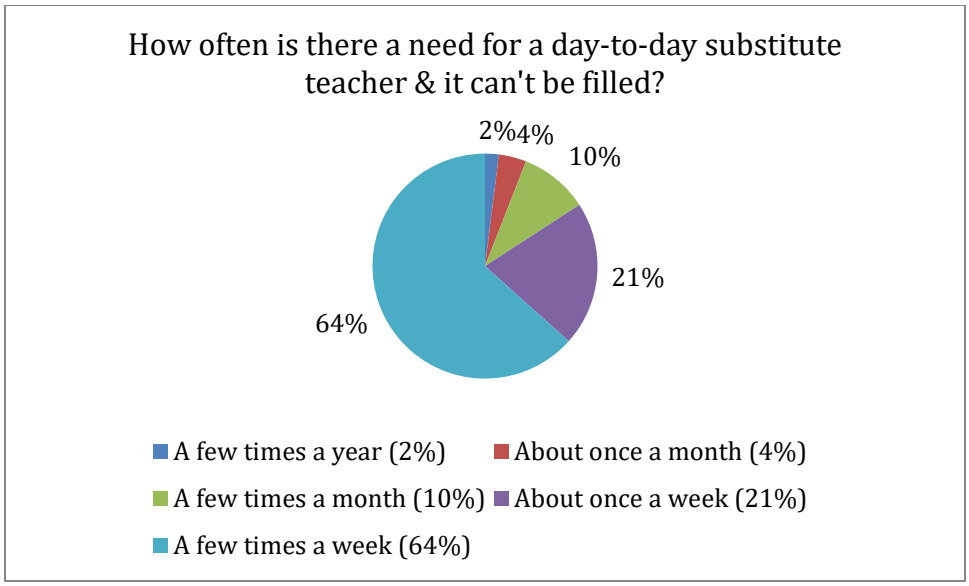
The final sample included responses from 177 school districts, which represents a third of all traditional non-charter districts in Michigan. All of the largest school districts (Detroit, Grand Rapids, Flint, Saginaw, and Lansing) responded to the survey. Weighted by enrollment size of the district, these

responses represent the administrators of 42% of the students in Michigan's traditional school districts, and 37% of students from any type of school. The sample was reasonably reflective of the types of school district in the state, without about a third of rural, suburban, and town school districts included. A larger proportion of urban ("city") districts (58%) responded. Nearly half of the responses were from rural districts (46%). The regional distribution of responses was similar when weighted by enrollment. Around 30% of responses were from the eastern (32%) and western (29%) regions of the state, and approximately a fifth from the central (20%) and northern (19%) regions.

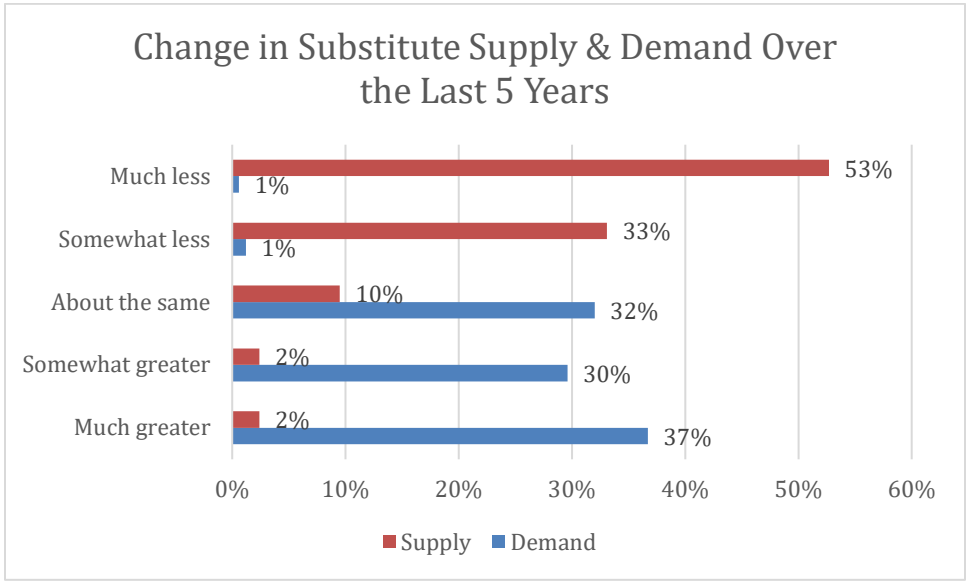
The main findings are presented in the following section, with full survey responses included in the Appendix. These include responses weighted by school enrollment (the main discussion relies on unweighted results), as well as those broken out by percent poverty, percent minority, region, and school type.[vi] For reasons of space, subgroup and weighted results will be made available in an online appendix.

The first set of questions relates to the substitute labor market. Despite anecdotal evidence, there is as yet no reliable set of statewide data to determine the scope of the substitute shortage. Nonetheless, based on the responses to this survey, it appears that reports of a serious shortage have not been exaggerated: only a third of school districts indicated that they usually had a sufficient number of substitutes in their geographic area ("always," 2%, and "most of the time," 31%). Two-thirds stated that they "sometimes" (38%) or "never" (29%) had enough substitutes. Although every type of school district indicated vacancies, the gaps appeared to be most severe in city (63% responding "never"), high minority (82%), and high-poverty (60%) districts. This probably accounts for the larger proportion of eastern and western school districts responding that they never had enough substitutes, since these areas include large urban centers with disadvantaged populations.

More dramatically, 64% of school districts responded that they were not able to find a substitute *multiple times a week*, and another 21% had unfilled vacancies once a week. A majority of respondents indicated that they had multiple vacancies a week no matter how the data was divided by district type, with the sole exception of northern districts, where this response still reached 49%. Probably due to their size, nearly all city (79%) and suburban (82%) school districts experienced routine shortages.



The data also suggest that the substitute shortage may be worsening. Most districts (67%) report a growing need for substitute teachers, and a plurality (37%) suggest a much greater need. Although the general pattern of growing *demand* for substitutes is fairly consistent across district type, urban, poorer, and high-minority districts are more likely to report a greater need. The results are even more stark when it comes to the *supply* of substitute teachers. A majority (53%) of respondents stated that there were many fewer substitutes available than five years ago, and a supermajority (86%) reported at least a moderate decrease in supply.



The survey also explored whether there were variations in the need for substitutes by time (day of the week and month), grade level, and content area. The vast majority (85%) reported greater need on

certain school days. For those respondents indicating that some days were higher need than others, 73% cited Friday, with Monday a distant second (15%). Two thirds (67%) also said that some months had more need of substitutes than others, of which most respondents cited May (69%). Assuming a fairly fixed supply of substitutes on any given day, a consistent pattern of when greater substitute demand occurs could result in systematic shortages at certain times of year or days of the week. By contrast, there was much less evidence for variations in the demand for substitutes by grade level (32%) or content area (20%) – although there is some indication that rural districts may have a greater need for high school substitutes.

Respondents were also asked a series of questions about policies and procedures for staffing substitutes. Most districts reported relying on the same group of people to serve as substitutes (70%), although this was much less the case for suburban districts (53%). School districts took diverse approaches to staffing day-to-day substitutes, with city (61%) and suburban (58%) districts more often staffing through the district central office, and rural (41%) and town (33%) districts at the school level. Similarly, city (78%) and suburban (67%) districts were much more likely to designate staff to oversee substitutes, although a majority report doing so in all types of districts.

What varied little by district location was reliance on external organizations, the TPPs, that were contracted to assist with substitute staffing to staff substitutes. Nearly all (97%) of school districts do so, with 81% reporting reliance on them to identify a pool of potential substitutes. The majority of districts rely on EDUStaff (76%). Most districts have used TPPs for six to ten years (57%). There was some reported turnover in use of TPPs, with 36% of the responding districts having the same one over the last 2-5 years, and another 29% over the last six to ten. TPPs seem to have had a fair degree of success, with 71% of survey respondents answering that positions are typically filled either all or most of the time, with modest variation by type of district.

In our online survey, we included a few open-ended questions related to the substitute teacher shortage in order to parse out nuances and greater detail. From the open-ended questions included in our survey, we found the majority of respondents (71%) used an online system to meet their substitute teacher needs. When a substitute teacher cannot be found, 77% of survey responses indicated the vacant position is filled internally by a teacher (e.g. teacher on their prep hour) and 23% of responses indicated the vacant position is filled internally by a building administrator, such as a principal. This connects to the findings from our focus group and interviews, which indicated that teachers often fill in for absent teachers when a substitute cannot be found.

One of our survey questions asked the participants to rank order content areas (Math, Science, Social Studies, and ELA) most often needing substitutes, and we included an “other” category. The “other” category was selected 17 times and almost half of the text entries connected to the “other” category indicated a need for substitutes in special education. Although the context of substitute teaching for special education is quite distinct from “regular” classroom teaching, this result warrants further attention by researchers and policymakers.

Interview Analysis and Focus Group Methods and Findings

In order to collect more detailed information from survey respondents, follow-up interviews were conducted with district central administrators. As described above, survey responses allowed us to divide districts into four locale categories and four regional categories; given both dimensions, then, there were 16 types of districts. There were no survey respondents from two district types – northern city and northern suburb. We randomly selected one survey respondent from each of the other types for 13 total potential interviewees. Multiple requests were made to arrange an interview with these administrators (overwhelmingly superintendents). If any given interview could not be scheduled (either because the prospective respondent declined or did not respond at all), a replacement was randomly chosen and contacted.

Within the time available for data collection, we interviewed a respondent from 13 of the 14 possible types of districts that responded to the survey; however, despite multiple districts and attempts, we were unable to interview a western town representative. Within the same period, due to the timing of district responses and scheduling, we interviewed two representatives from districts categorized as northern town, northern rural, and central suburban. We conducted all 16 of our semi-structured interviews by Zoom phone or video connection according to a common, previously developed protocol based on the online survey. Each lasted about 30 minutes, during which interviewees were asked to elaborate on their responses to the online survey. Interviews were recorded, transcribed, and iteratively coded according to topic and response type.

In addition to collecting data on substitute teacher policies and practices through our online survey instrument and follow-up interviews, we also conducted a focus group session. Focus groups are useful when the topic of study is one that "people could talk about to each other in their everyday lives – but don't" (Macnaghten and Myers, 2004, p. 65). Our focus group consisted of twelve school district level leaders from across mid-Michigan, each of whom had human resources-related roles and responsibilities. Their positions, knowledge, and experience made them ideal participants for a focus group on substitute teacher policies and practices. Moreover, because focus groups allow for participant interaction (Merriam and Tisdell, 2016), they may result in different findings and perspectives compared to a survey instrument alone. Given our participants' backgrounds in human resources, including how districts use substitute teachers, the focus group method provided them with the opportunity to dialogue around substitute teacher policies and practices. The result was rich conversation that may not have surfaced otherwise.

All districts represented in the interviews and focus group relied on a TPP to supply substitute teachers through an automated system. However, all districts devoted individualized attention to filling long-term assignments. Further, it was a common practice for teachers and administrators to seek certain substitute teachers based on prior experience or relationship.

The focus group participants and all but three districts from the interviews saw their relationship with the TPP as at least satisfactory; the other views were mixed or unclear, with no district dissatisfied overall. The TPP relieved all districts of the expense and administrative burden of maintaining an in-

house substitute teacher system. Both the interviewees and focus group members similarly acknowledged the TPP's efforts to recruit more substitute teachers, although those efforts were not seen as very successful because the substitute teacher pool is shallow across the board. The sentiment of the greater majority across regions and locales is well represented by the interview respondent who explained that the problem lies not with the TPP, but rather that "everybody is fighting over the same sub pool. So, there is still a shortage with them, but that's not their fault, not anybody's fault. It's just how it is."

Interview respondents and focus group participants were unanimous in saying that a substitute teacher shortage has persisted over several years. The need (demand) for substitute teachers has slightly increased over the past few years, while the supply has noticeably decreased, resulting in classroom teacher absences going unfilled on a regular basis. When we probed about these changes in supply and demand of substitute teachers, focus group participants pointed to four main contributing factors. First, there has been a general reduction in unemployment, which results in fewer individuals looking for temporary work, such as substitute teaching. Interviewees also mentioned better job prospects outside of subbing. Second, districts have seen a slight increase in teacher absences, increasing the need for substitute teachers. Focus group participants suggested teacher absences have increased because of state-required Individualized Education Program meetings, professional development, and greater stress due to accountability pressures. Third, districts perceived an educator shortage in general, which could be due to declining enrollments in teacher preparation programs (Will, 2018), such as at traditionally large educational institutions like Michigan State University. This contributes to the substitute teacher problem because in previous years, college-aged students interested in teaching would serve as substitutes once they had enough credit hours. Substitute teaching was an attractive way to earn extra pay while also gaining teaching experience, which might help later when seeking full-time employment. The pool of college-aged students is also reduced due to changes to teacher preparation programs that make students less available for paid substitute teacher work. Similarly, focus group participants suggested that the reputation of the teaching profession has declined in recent years, further diminishing younger generations' interest in it. Fourth, changes to state policy around the teacher retirement system drastically reduced the role of retired teachers in the substitute pool, which was a portion of the pool heavily relied upon by districts. The state aimed to fix a double-dipping loophole to the retirement system, but in the process also made it financially disadvantageous for districts to hire and for retired teachers to accept work as substitute teachers.[vii]

All but one interview respondent said their own district had a shortage. While a majority of interviewees reported that the intensity of shortage was stable, variable, or worsened, the central region and town locale were relatively better off. Somewhat contrary to the survey and focus group, only three interviewees from town and rural locale respondents felt that district demand/need for substitute teachers had been increasing over time. Everyone else thought that their overall demand/need showed little or no change. Similar to the focus group responses, all interviewees thought that increased demand for professional development, especially initiatives that occupied many teachers at once during the school

day, had challenged the substitute system for years. Still, many had developed strategies to at least partially adapt by adjusting their PD calendars, limiting participation, or calling back PD attendees when necessary.

On the substitute demand side, interview data were distinct from survey and focus group data concerning how districts' need for substitutes related to teacher absenteeism. The survey, focus group, and interview respondents suggested a connection between substitute need and increased teacher absenteeism. Of the eight interview respondents suggesting a link between teacher absenteeism and the substitute shortage, three came from rural locales, three from city, and one each from a suburb and from a town. All eight appeared to agree with this rural superintendent:

> It's really tough. We want subs when we need them, but the bottom line is that we really don't want to have subs. We want our staff in the classroom, and that's more of what we've been trying to look at and what we are trying to have conversations with our teaching association about is, how do we get our teachers in the classroom more?

With respect to the shortage in supply of substitute teachers, interviewees and focus group participants expressed a near universal consensus. Respondents in districts across regions and locales cited *both* the availability of better jobs for prospective substitutes (in terms of pay, schedule, and job stability and security) *and* a shortage in the supply of regular teachers, especially due to reductions in the teacher training and employment pipeline. Strong interview majorities pointed to substitutes' preferences for certain jobs or assignments and mostly negative perceptions of substituting, a sentiment echoed in the focus group. Only four interviewees thought state restrictions on the employment of retirees as substitutes played a significant role in the shortage; however, the focus group unanimously agreed these state restrictions were important contributing factors to the shortage. Interviewees in town and rural locales frequently named local teacher supply issues as a factor.

As the survey data demonstrates, many districts face day-to-day substitute teacher shortages in any given week. Thus, schools in all districts represented in the interviews and focus group temporarily reassigned building personnel (e.g. another teacher, instructional coach, building administrator, etc.) to cover unfilled substitute assignments. Somewhat less often, students in uncovered classes were combined with or split among other classes. "Reassignment" at the secondary level typically involved classroom teachers giving up their prep hour to supervise an uncovered class. At the elementary level, a variety of non-classroom personnel—usually administrators, but also coaches, counselors, paraprofessionals, etc.— commonly took over uncovered classes. Practically all collective bargaining agreements required compensation for teachers who lost prep time, often at an hourly rate greater than that paid to a substitute. In four responding districts across all regions, but mostly in suburban locales, teachers elected comp time in lieu of hourly pay, which in the long run exacerbated, if not the substitute shortage itself, the adverse effect of teacher absences. Focus group participants indicated these quick

fixes have serious drawbacks, including increased costs, and compromised instruction and student learning.

The focus group participants expressed the perception that the state has done little to address the challenges associated with the substitute teacher shortage. While recent legislation reduced the number of college credit hours required to qualify more individuals for substitute positions (see above, p. 3, and references), most interviewees and participants in the focus group did not find this change to have much of an impact on the supply of substitute teachers. Moreover, the focus group and most interviewees speculated that the lower education requirement might adversely affect substitute teacher quality. Only one other state policy fix was recently enacted to target the substitute shortage. It extended school districts' ability to directly hire teacher-retirees as substitutes, without them incurring a reduction in their retirement benefits (see above, p. 3, and references). While the focus group identified the limits on retiree hires as a significant factor contributing to the shortage, only two districts employed a few retirees as day-to-day substitutes, and six used retirees on an ad hoc basis – i.e., for specific assignments such as a long-term substitute. Still, six interview respondents from all regions favored a state policy change that would allow TPPs to employ retirees on the same terms as any other substitute, as did the focus group. Five interviewees also cited greater state educational funding as a potential remedy.

Three longer-term local measures emerged from the interviews and focus group. First, within the last few years, practically all represented districts have raised their substitute pay rate or considered raising their rate. A long-standing "gentleman's agreement" to keep substitute rates common across districts within a particular ISD was broken when districts started facing a shortage of substitutes. Once one district increased the pay rate, other districts felt compelled to do likewise. However, not all could follow suit due to budgetary constraints. Anecdotally, district representatives reported that raising the substitute teacher rate did have a small impact on the supply, but it did not solve the problem. Some substitute teachers have preferences about which districts they work in and what assignments they accept, which is why a pay increase may not have the desired impact. Beyond the increased expense per district, a majority of interview respondents thought that additional rate increases might only spur competition among districts without prompting a substantial increase in the substitute pool. A second type of local response to the shortage was reported: the implementation of a variety of monetary and non-monetary incentives. The most prevalent of the compensation incentives involved "bonus" payments or pay rate increases based on the number or distribution of days spent substituting in the particular district. The non-monetary incentives mostly took the forms of free meals or snacks and/or fostering a more welcoming and supportive environment for substitutes. Finally, some of the focus group participants and interviewees employed permanent substitutes, while others reported they were considering the move.

Policy Implications and Recommendations for Michigan

With the unpredictability and the inevitability of teacher absences, practically all K-12 public school districts count on substitute teachers as classroom instructors. Without a reliable supply of substitutes, districts are forced to respond in ways that entail very real short- and long-term costs – both financial and educational. Despite the apparent persistence of a widespread shortage, there is little concrete information available about the substitute labor market. The paucity of data makes it difficult for school administrators and policymakers to effectively respond to the shortage. It also raises serious obstacles for researchers in producing usable, high-quality analysis.

This report should serve as baseline for further rigorous research and effective policies around a vital but understudied segment of the teacher labor market. While recognizing that this study relies on the perspectives of district administrators, the consistency of the findings strongly suggests that stakeholders should consider the following responses:

- Change the public employment retiree law to make it easier for retired teachers to work as substitutes.
- Improve district and state collection and reporting of substitute teacher data.
- Support district partnerships with teacher and paraprofessional (4-year and 2-year degree) training programs.
- Encourage substitute and teacher absence data sharing, analysis, and problem solving among local stakeholders.

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Notes

[i] This research unsystematically includes a wide range of substitute teacher traits or behaviors, including their work preparation and experiences (Bletzer, 2009; Clifton and Rambaran, 1987; Friedman, 1983); psychological characteristics such as job satisfaction (Duggleby and Badal, 2007; Gonzales, 2002), apprehensions (Johnson, 1988), and identity formation (Driedger-Enns, 2014) or image representation (Weems, 2003); and behaviors such as job-acceptance decisions (Gershenson, 2012) and effective classroom actions (Fielder, 1991). A second strand of research, which varies less in its objective but more in its rigor, concerns generic perceptions, roles, and expectations of substitute teachers as the basis for advice on how to support and improve their professional status, classroom performance, and school experience (see, e.g., Boyer, 1998; Cardon, 2002; Moses, 1989). A final set of studies takes a broader approach, reviewing district level substitute teacher programs and proposing systemic reforms (see, e.g., Rose, Beattie, and White, 1987; Manera, 1982).

[ii] In addition, while Dorward, et al. (2000) considered national perceptions of substitute teacher quality, pay, and impact of teacher participation in professional development, Griswold (2001) attempted to learn what Ohio districts were doing to maintain the substitute teacher pool. The former also sited commonly asserted causes of a shortage (see also Currence, 1985), and the latter recommended several district strategies to ameliorate any shortage (see also Russo, 2001).

[iii] Michigan's Revised School Code expressly authorizes local districts and ISDs to contract with TPPs, with minimal regulation (Westlaw, 2019b, text of MCL 380.1236a).

[iv] Technically, the benefit protection for retirees returning to teaching only applies to geographic areas and school subjects in which a "critical shortage" of available teachers exist (Westlaw, 2019a, text of MCL 38.1361). But for years virtually all districts in all subjects have qualified with respect to substitute teaching (see Michigan Department of Education [MDE], 2019; House Fiscal Agency, 2018a, 2018b).

[v] The legislative responses were in effect at the beginning of the 2018-19 school year, when this research began. In October, 2018, the second largest TPP in Michigan, Professional Educational Services Group (PESG), without warning closed its doors, reportedly leaving more than 100 districts without substitute teachers (Higgins, 2018; Huffman, 2018). The study proceeded even as, it appears, EDUStaff successfully took over in most of these districts.

[vi] It should be noted that there is a risk of response bias. Although the sample generally reflects every region and type of district, it is possible that the third of school districts choosing to respond could have different substitute experiences than non-respondents. For example, it would not be surprising that administrators suffering more serious shortages (or anxieties about shortages) were more motivated to take the survey. In addition, comparisons across types of school districts (by race, poverty, region, or location) generally suffer from small sample sizes, making it difficult to determine whether differences are statistically significant. The results should therefore be interpreted with some caution.

[vii] Depending on the particular circumstances, the employment of a teacher-retiree as a substitute teacher may make the district liable for retirement benefit payments and may in effect impose a reduction on the retiree's benefit (Westlaw, 2019a, text of MCL 38.1361).

Appendix

Tables of Survey Questions and Responses

1.What is your current role in the ISD/District/School?

Superintendent	Principal	Other
79%	2%	19%

N=176

2.How long have you been in your current role?

0-1 yrs	2-5 yrs	6-10 yrs	11-15 yrs	16+ yrs
16%	44%	29%	7%	5%

N=177

3.How long have you worked in your current district?

0-1 yrs	2-5 yrs	6-10 yrs	11-15 yrs	16+ yrs
9%	32%	17%	10%	33%

N=177

4.On average, how many day-to-day (short-term) substitute teachers are needed in a given week in your district?

0-5	6-10	11-15	16-20	21-30	31+
21%	20%	12%	12%	11%	23%

N=177

5.Does the need for day-to-day substitute teachers vary by the day of week?

Yes	No	Not Sure
85%	10%	6%

N=177

5a. Day of the Week listed as greatest need

Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
15%	7%	3%	1%	73%

N=150

6.Does the need for day-to-day substitute teachers vary by month?

Yes	No	Not Sure
67%	18%	15%

N=175

6a. Month listed as greatest need

Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec
17%	39%	36%	45%	69%	3%	5%	22%	24%	36%

N=116

7. Does the need for day-to-day substitute teachers vary by grade level?

Yes	No	Not Sure
32%	46%	22%

N=174

7a. Grade band listed as greatest need

K to 2	3 to 5	6 to 8	9 to 12
25%	28%	11%	36%

N=153

8. Does the need for day-to-day substitute teachers vary by content area?

Yes	No	Not Sure
20%	61%	19%

N=174

8a. Subject listed as greatest need

Math	Science	Social Studies	ELA	Other
20%	13%	7%	13%	47%

N=30

9. Are there usually enough substitute teachers in your geographic area to meet your day-to-day substitute teacher needs?

Always / Almost Always	Most of the time	Sometimes	Never / Almost Never
2%	31%	38%	29%

N=173

10. How often is there a need for a day-to-day substitute teacher & it can't be filled?

A few times a year	About once a month	A few times a month	About once a week	A few times a week
2%	4%	10%	21%	64%

N=173

11. Does your district usually rely on the same individuals to fill in as substitute teachers?

Mainly the same individuals	Mix of new and old individuals	Usually new individuals
70%	30%	1%

N=173

12. How does the district, school, or teacher obtain a list or "pool" of substitute teachers available for assignment?

External agency / Third-party provider	83%
ISD/District	5%
Personal contacts	5%
Retired teachers	2%
Other	5%

N=173

13. Does your district employ full-time substitute teachers to fill in on any given day?

Yes	No	Not Sure
33%	64%	3%

N=171

14. Does your school/district/ISD have a substitute teacher policy?

I am not aware of any policies at my school, district, or ISD	31%
Yes, my district has a policy	38%
Yes, my ISD has a policy	11%
Yes, my school has a policy	26%

N=168

15. Who is primarily responsible for finding a day-to-day substitute teacher?

District	ISD	School	Teacher	Other
35%	1%	30%	15%	19%

N=171

16. Is there a designated person in your district who oversees the process for finding day-to-day substitute teachers?

Yes	No
61%	39%

N=170

17. Does your district use a third-party provider to fulfill substitute teacher needs?

Yes	No
97%	3%

N=170

18. Please provide the names of all third-party providers your district uses to fulfill substitute teacher needs.

Edustaff	Other Named
76%	20%

N=165

19. Is the third-party provider contractually required to find a day-to-day substitute when your district has a need?

Yes	29%
No	11%
No, but they are contractually required to use their network to help find one	53%
Not Sure	7%

N=165

20. How often is the third-party provider typically able to fill substitute teacher needs?

Always / Almost Always	Most of the time	Sometimes	Never / Almost Never
6%	65%	26%	3%

N=165

21. Including the current year, how long has your district used its current third-party provider?

0-1 yrs	2-5 yrs	6-10 yrs	11+ yrs	Not Sure
24%	38%	32%	2%	4%

N=164

22. Including the current year, how long has your district used its current third-party provider?

0-1 yrs	2-5 yrs	6-10 yrs	11+ yrs	Not Sure
24%	38%	32%	2%	4%

N=164

23. Which of the following, if any, do you view as issues with the current substitute teacher system, process, or policy? (Check all that apply.)

The need for substitute teachers frequently exceeds the number available	76%
Substitute teachers are frequently mis-assigned or mis-matched with open positions	7%
There is a lack of data or information on how the district substitute teacher system or policy works in practice	3%
There is little or no district coordination or control on the recruitment, use, or assignment of substitute teachers	1%
I do not have any particular issue in this area	12%
Other	10%

N=177

24. How has the NEED for substitute teachers changed in your district over the last 5 years or so?

Much greater need	Somewhat greater need	About the same need	Somewhat less need	Much less need
37%	30%	32%	1%	1%

N=169

25. How has the SUPPLY of substitute teachers changed in your district over the last 5 years or so?

Much less supply	Somewhat less supply	About the same supply	Somewhat greater supply	Much greater supply
53%	33%	10%	2%	2%

N=169

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