The Washington Post

Education

High-poverty schools often staffed by rotating cast of substitutes

By Emma Brown December 4

Mya Alford dreams of studying chemical engineering in college, but the high school junior is at a disadvantage: Last year, her chemistry teacher at Pittsburgh's Westinghouse Academy quit just weeks after school started, and the class was taught by a substitute who, as Alford put it, "didn't know chemistry."

The year before, there was no permanent biology teacher until December. Students at Westinghouse, a high-poverty school in one of Pittsburgh's roughest neighborhoods, often see a rotating cast of substitutes, Alford said.

"You're looking at test scores," Alford said of the school's low performance on state standardized tests in math, science and reading. "But we didn't have a stable teacher."

Every U.S. classroom needs a sub from time to time. But in the troubled schools that serve some of the nation's neediest children, it is not uncommon for classrooms to churn with substitutes as teachers leave in large numbers each June, or quit midyear, and principals struggle to fill the positions.

The disruption of teachers coming and going and the frequent use of substitutes with varying levels of skill and commitment effectively steal learning time from students who can least afford it, experts say.

Just 27 states require substitutes to be certified teachers, according to the National Council on Teacher Quality. The council's database of teacher-related policies in 118 districts — including the 50 largest and the largest in each state — shows that just 61 districts, about half, require subs to have a bachelor's degree. Eleven require no more than a high school diploma or GED, and eight have no policies addressing substitutes' qualifications.

"It's the elephant in the room," said David Sapp, director of education advocacy and legal counsel at the American Civil Liberties Union of Southern California, linking the issue to "persistent chronic failure at certain schools."

The ACLU branch has brought several lawsuits related to public schools' teacher churn and heavy use of substitutes. "There are a narrow set of schools where this happens all the time, and until that gets really unpacked and resolved, there's only so much that can be done to close the achievement gap," Sapp said.

Urban school districts hire 1 in 6 of their teachers after the school year begins, according to Brown University

professors Matthew A. Kraft and John P. Papay, whose research has shown a link between late hires and lower student achievement. And the problem appears to be growing as teacher shortages intensify nationwide, leaving school systems struggling to fill vacancies.

Jefferson County, Ky., had 107 vacancies in November, for example, more than 1.5 percent of the teaching corps in the state's largest district, which includes Louisville, and still had 50 remaining empty spots as of this week. Philadelphia still needs to hire 136 teachers, and Detroit needs 135 teachers — more than 5 percent of its teaching positions — and the city has just 90 subs, so principals or other school staffers must cover most of the remaining classes, according to a Detroit schools representative.

That means thousands of children in those districts, and many thousands more elsewhere, have gone three months or more without permanent teachers this school year.

Kelly Gwaltney, who formerly served as chief school performance officer in North Carolina's Charlotte-Mecklenburg district, said teacher instability is a common problem in struggling high-poverty schools.

"The number one reason why people leave is it's hard," Gwaltney said. She left her position at central office this year to become a principal at high-poverty Garinger High, where she hopes to make a bigger difference by working directly with students and teachers.

This fall, she had a group of incoming freshmen who had not had a permanent math teacher in eighth grade. Eighty percent of them were not proficient in math, according to state tests, she said — because "they didn't get instruction last year."

She also had a group of sophomores who had had subs in place of a permanent math teacher. Gwaltney invited those students to an extra month of math lessons during the summer.

"You have to think through what happened last year and what was their experience," she said. "How do you make sure that kids don't go two years without a teacher?"

Gwaltney hired 56 teachers this summer, out of a total of approximately 140 on staff. Eighty-six percent of her staff members have between zero and three years' experience.

She is striving to change her school's culture and thinks she has improved morale; two teachers have left this year, down from five at the same point last year. But she worries: "The bottom line fact is I will have great people and train them up, and they'll transfer and go to a school that's not quite so complex."

The scope of the substitute problem is difficult to gauge because comprehensive data on this kind of classroom

instability is not reported in a uniform way and often is not reported at all.

Under the Obama administration, all schools have, for the first time, been required to report how frequently their teachers are absent. Most teachers are rarely absent, but 28 percent are absent more than 10 days a year, according to federal data collected in 2012.

Several studies have shown that teachers in high-poverty schools are absent more frequently than teachers in more-affluent schools, contributing to the instability. A 2007 study of North Carolina schools, for example, found that a quarter of low-income middle schools had persistently high teacher absenteeism; among more-affluent middle schools, fewer than 1 in 12 had the same high absenteeism rate.

But absenteeism figures do not capture late hiring, midyear teacher turnover or teachers missing from the classroom entirely.

“This is not an issue that we see in high-income communities,” said Catherine E. Lhamon, assistant secretary for civil rights at the U.S. Department of Education. “We know that we are shortchanging our kids and that it’s not a phenomenon that is equally borne across our school districts.”

Before joining the federal government, Lhamon was a civil rights lawyer who argued cases on behalf of students who saw constant teacher churn. In a 2010 lawsuit she litigated, a California classroom had 19 substitute teachers in a single semester. At the time, Lhamon’s mother told her that the situation seemed worse than going to segregated schools, as she had in Richmond, Va., “because at least we had teachers.”

Lhamon said teacher instability is a problem that has persisted in plain view. “It has seemed hard and intractable and almost a given that that is the way of the world and so we can’t solve it. And I know that we can solve it,” Lhamon said.

The Education Department took a step toward addressing the problem last year when it issued guidance outlining schools’ obligations to provide all students with equitable access to resources — including an effective and stable teaching force. The department enforces the requirement via civil rights investigations and has opened at least one such probe: The agency is examining whether teacher instability in Florida’s Duval County is disproportionately affecting black and Hispanic students’ access to education.

Struggling high-poverty schools are difficult to staff for many reasons, experts say. Such schools often see an exodus of teachers at the end of each year, so their principals are constantly looking for new hires.

They tend to employ teachers who are more inexperienced than the hires at affluent schools, and they often are not

adequately trained for the intense environments they will face, making them more likely to leave, said Linda Darling-Hammond, a professor emerita at Stanford who heads the Learning Policy Institute, an education think tank. Inexperienced teachers also are often the first to be laid off in tough budget times, which means layoffs can disproportionately affect high-poverty schools.

In most districts, teachers earn the same salary regardless of their school assignment. Some see high-poverty schools as more difficult because many students come to school already behind academically and facing serious challenges in their lives, many of which are beyond a teacher's control.

And it is not uncommon for veteran teachers to feel that they are fending for themselves without instructional support or consistent, school-wide expectations for student behavior.

Sara Duckett said she left her job at Ballou Senior High in Southeast Washington last December after she started having anxiety attacks and chest pains that she attributed to job stress.

Duckett had taught for eight years, including in high-poverty schools in the District. She loved that work and was known for her strong relationships with students. But she struggled at Ballou, she said, and found it difficult to maintain order. She asked for an assistant to help her manage a class with many students who had disabilities and behavioral issues. She said she never got steady help.

Duckett once referred a student to an administrator for throwing a pencil at her, grazing her eye. But nothing happened. The environment was too chaotic for teaching, she said.

"I love the kids to pieces. They knew I loved them to death. But everything that was out of my control was literally out of my control, and it was driving me crazy," said Duckett, who now teaches at a private therapeutic school in Fairfax County. "I stayed as long as I could, but when my health became a factor, I said, 'This is something I cannot do.' "

A D.C. Public Schools spokeswoman said 120 teachers — 3 percent of the system's total — left midyear between 2014 and 2015. Schools officials are working to reduce that number with an effort to improve the culture at 20 schools, she said.

Ending the turnover cycle and creating stable teams is one of many challenges that principals face when they are tasked with turning around struggling schools.

Alford, the aspiring chemical engineer in Pittsburgh, said that she was shortchanged in previous years but that her school has been transformed under the leadership of Principal LouAnn Zwieryznski, who is in her second year.

“We have teachers here,” Alford said. “Every class is a steady teacher. You come in, and it’s the same person.”

Emma Brown writes about national education and about people with a stake in schools, including teachers, parents and kids.