

Valley school districts facing deep substitute teacher shortage

By Hannah
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Finding extra chairs and scouring the school library for spare textbooks has become routine for Felipe Lemus, a fifth-grade teacher at Calwa Elementary School in southeast Fresno.

Instead of teaching his prepared English lessons, Lemus too often finds himself scrambling to deal with a class of students that balloons from 23 to more than 30 every time his school can't find a substitute teacher for one of Lemus' colleagues.

It's a headache that seems to pound more frequently these days as teachers are pulled out of class for heavier loads of professional development training or simply call in sick. In some cases, students are shifted into lunchrooms or libraries to watch movies or finish assignments. Sometimes a principal or other administrator will fill in.

But more often than not, students wind up sharing desks or sometimes sitting on the floor in an unfamiliar classroom, Lemus said.

"I can adjust, but it seems like I'm more babysitting than teaching," he said.

In schools across Fresno Unified, a shortage of substitute teachers is becoming more apparent, especially in classrooms in the city's southeast and southwest corners, school district data show.

The situation here is not unique — an improved economy has pulled teachers who took substitute jobs during the recession back into the classroom and depleted the substitute pool as a result. Teachers and administrators in Fresno, Clovis, Central and Sanger agree a growing problem is at hand.

A crowded classroom

Printing out last-minute assignments. Moving chairs from next-door rooms. Crowding extra bodies around tables. That's what Lemus deals with when one of his fellow fifth-grade teachers is ill and no substitute shows up.

It's a real nuisance for students and their teachers. District officials say it's rare for a teacher to take on this type of extra load — Plan A is calling on administrators or other adults to take over the class. Plan B, splitting up a class of students among other classrooms, is "a last-ditch effort," district spokeswoman Micheline Golden said.

Teachers say the opposite. Having to plan for an extra set of seven or eight students has become an almost weekly occurrence, Lemus said. A shortage of substitutes has become the new reality.

Education administrators agree the problem is easily explained by a turnaround in the economy.

The Fresno area's supply of substitutes, once full of credentialed teachers who were pink-slipped during recession years, has been sapped as districts have begun hiring again.

Pat Riley, assistant director for the Service Employees International Union chapter that represents Fresno Unified substitutes, said the district hired back at least 70 teachers to full-time jobs this school year.

But Riley acknowledged that the district has hired more substitutes. District officials say they've hired 163 substitutes this year. About 1,051 people substitute for the district.

But hiring isn't happening fast enough. The new Common Core state standards call for more teacher professional development, which means teachers are pulled out of class for training more frequently than in years past.

Of the 27,534 instances since August when teachers have been out for training or illness, a substitute was unavailable 1,334 times, district data show.

As more professional development is provided to instructors, the likelihood increases that "a teacher will be pulled out of a classroom," Golden said. "We're working very hard to arrange the professional learning situation to minimize the amount of time" instructors are out of their classrooms.

Administrators in Clovis, Sanger and Central Unified school districts say they're facing the same issue.

"Bottom line, we're all drawing from the same pool of talent," said Mike Berg, superintendent for Central Unified schools.

Berg said many substitutes for his district are also on other districts' lists.

"They might be getting an offer from all of us and pick the best one," he said, which is one reason Central recently upped substitutes' daily pay from \$105 to \$115. In Clovis, substitutes are paid \$105. They're paid between \$107 and \$114 at Fresno Unified schools.

Being a substitute is a tough job, Sanger Unified Superintendent Matt Navo said, and higher pay is one of the only ways to get substitutes to take jobs in smaller, more rural districts. This school year Sanger increased elementary substitute daily pay from \$95 to \$120 and middle and high school pay from \$115 to \$125. On "bonus days" when several teachers are in training, the district will pay substitutes \$150.

"I don't think there's really a way to make that job more appealing. It is what it is," Navo said. "Really, all school districts have is to offer them the support of the other teachers, the administrator who is there. Really, the pay is what

garners the motivation to come out.”

Clovis Unified is taking its own measures to expand its pool of substitutes, said spokeswoman Kelly Avants, like recruiting Fresno State students who might be eligible to become substitutes.

A north-south divide

Among Fresno Unified’s 63 elementary schools, Calwa is among those with the lowest rates of securing a substitute. Of the bottom 10, nine fall south of Olive Avenue.

To be sure, most classrooms don’t go without a substitute when a teacher is in training or calls in sick: on average between August and December, 95% of elementary classrooms had someone to fill in. Even among schools with the lowest rates, a substitute was available at least 83% of the time.

The system for selecting a substitute can be complicated. Those that form a good relationship with a teacher can pick their classroom over others when a job assignment comes up. Substitutes can always turn down offers at schools they don’t like.

No one seems sure why substitutes tend to take jobs to the north. And the numbers only tell part of the story.

Union representative Riley said there is no unwritten rule that his SEIU members only take jobs north of Olive Avenue

“They don’t make statements like that, they go where they’re comfortable,” he said. “It’s basically walking in to work every day as a new employee.”

But Calwa’s Lemus, who has worked at the school for almost a dozen years, said the realities of the city’s southernmost schools could be a turn-off to some people.

“Our students are a little bit more hard to handle,” he said. “They’re a little rowdier. They have a lot of issues with personal life ... just the fact that the environment is more difficult to handle.”

Tish Rice, president of the Fresno Teachers Association, noticed the trend after requesting district data on substitutes in the fall.

“It was brought to my attention that subs will pick up jobs” on one side of town, and drop that assignment when an option comes up at a school they prefer, she said. “Now these schools are in a bind.”

Rice said schools across Fresno Unified — in all areas of the city — have been dealing with the problem for at least two years.

“I know it impacts education, it impacts the learning environment and that’s not a good thing,” she said.

Across the Valley, “It’s going to be a long-term issue,” Navo said. “As school districts acquire more staff, the training and support that’s necessary to continue to improve never stops ... We’re always going to need subs, we’re always going to need support.”

Substitutes in demand

Fresno Unified elementary schools with the five best and five worst substitute fill rates (August-December 2014). To see details on each school, click on the school’s bar.

Find your school

Look up the substitute fill rate at individual Fresno Unified elementary schools in this database:

[Online Database](#) by Caspio

[Click here](#) to load this Caspio [Online Database](#).

Pay for substitute teachers

(district daily rate)

Central \$115

Clovis \$105

Fresno \$107-\$114

Sanger \$120-\$150

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