

The Experience of Substitute Teaching in Alberta Schools

A Research Report



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AN ATA RESEARCH UPDATE: February 2010

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The Alberta
Teachers' Association

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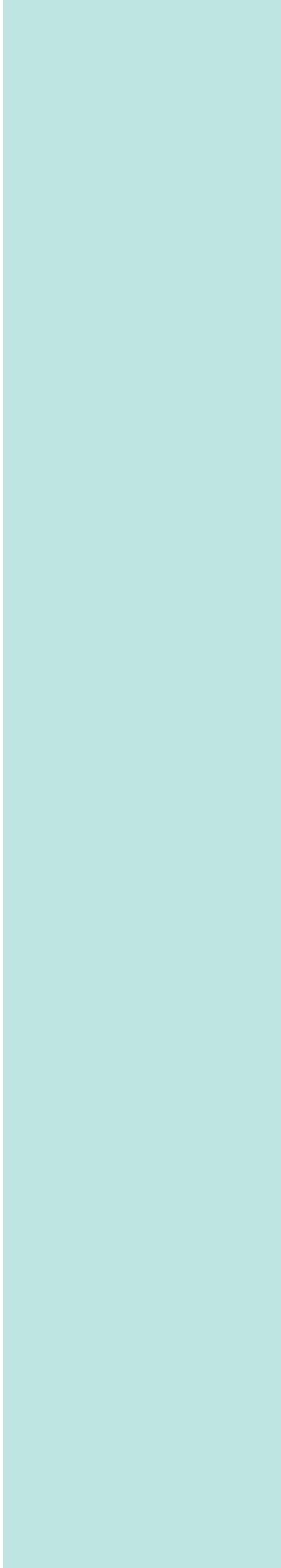
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Preface

This publication analyzes the results of an online survey of substitute teachers that the Alberta Teachers' Association, with research assistance from the University of Alberta, conducted in the fall of 2008.

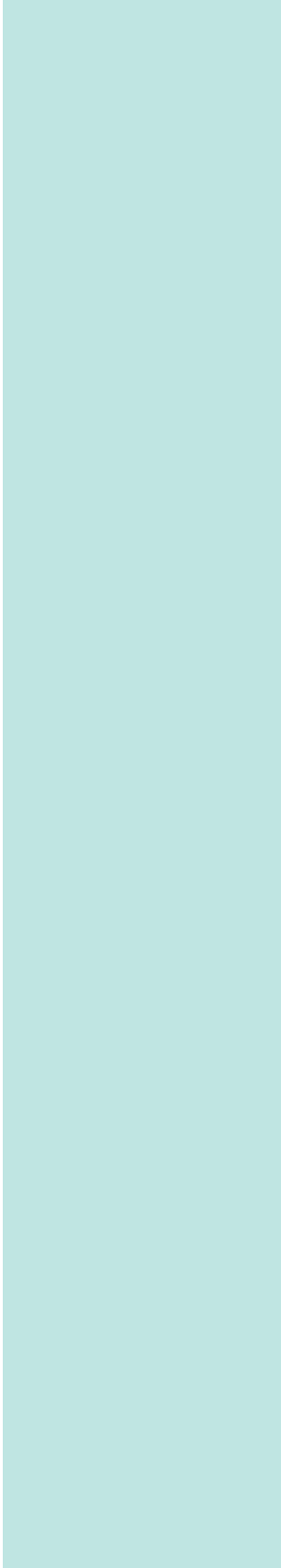
The study reveals that substitute teachers are a diverse group whose experiences are, not surprisingly, coloured by the context of the school community in which they work. An overwhelming majority of participants described substitute teaching as a rewarding experience. At the same time, they raised a number of significant issues that require attention. One such issue is the lack of transparency in some jurisdictions with respect to how teachers are hired. Another is the discrepancy between substitute teachers and regular classroom teachers with respect to such matters as pay, benefits and access to professional development opportunities. Still another is that, in some jurisdictions, substitute teachers are subjected to working conditions that actually violate legislation and/or the terms of the collective agreement. Substitute teachers who encounter such employment situations are encouraged to contact the Association for assistance.

Interestingly, many of the concerns that substitute teachers raised about teaching and learning conditions echo those of their full- or part-time colleagues. For example, like all teachers in the province, substitute teachers are uncertain about their ongoing employment prospects, an uncertainty rooted in education funding, among other issues. Furthermore, substitute teachers, like their full-time colleagues, are finding themselves exposed to a growing range of demands as teaching itself becomes a more complex activity.

Approximately 5,000 substitute teachers currently work in Alberta's more than 1,850 schools. Obviously, an online survey such as the one employed in this study cannot capture the full range of issues that substitute teachers encounter on a daily basis. However, the Association hopes that this report will not only give education stakeholders a deeper appreciation of the vital role that substitute teachers play in Alberta's schools but also prompt them to take whatever measures they can to support this vital sector of the teaching force.

A special thank you to Bradley Arkison and Laura Servage, both graduate students at the University of Alberta, who helped facilitate the survey and analyze the results. Thanks also go to the substitute teachers who provided feedback on a draft version of this report that was presented at the ATA's November 2009 Substitute Teachers' Conference. Finally, a sincere thank you to ATA Executive Staff Officer J-C Couture, who coordinated the study; Executive Staff Officer Kurt Moench, who provided valuable feedback on the final report; and ATA Administrative Officer Harlan James, who helped prepare the report for publication.

Gordon R Thomas
Executive Secretary



Executive Summary

In the fall of 2008, the Alberta Teachers' Association, with the assistance of two University of Alberta researchers, conducted an online survey to assess the current teaching and learning conditions of substitute teachers in Alberta and to solicit suggestions on how those conditions might be improved. A total of 560 substitute teachers responded to the survey, which was available online from 2008 10 17 to 2008 12 20. The text of the survey is attached as Appendix A.

With respect to demographics, 75.4 per cent of the respondents were female and tended toward the older end of the age spectrum: 38 per cent were 55 years of age or older, compared with the 25 per cent who were 35 or younger. About 37 per cent of respondents were seeking full-time teaching positions. Respondents tended to be generalists: 48 per cent reported teaching all grades or a combination of grades, 35 per cent worked mainly in elementary schools, 7 per cent worked mainly in junior high and 8 per cent worked mainly in senior high.

Although substitute teachers are a diverse group and bring a wide range of experiences, needs and expectations to their work, most match one of three basic profiles. The first consists of young, beginning teachers whose goal is to obtain a permanent position and who are substitute teaching to gain experience and to become better known to the school board. The second consists of somewhat older teachers who, to supplement their family income, are returning to the profession after having taken a number of years off, typically to raise a family. They may or may not be seeking a permanent position. The third consists of retired teachers who are substituting partly to supplement their pension but also to stay active in the profession, which they miss.

Most respondents reported that they found their work generally satisfying and that they enjoyed positive relationships with students. However, the stage at which respondents are in their career and their life circumstances tend to affect the degree to which they derive satisfaction from substitute teaching. Teachers with 20 or more years of teaching experience, for example, reported deriving more satisfaction from substitute teaching than their younger counterparts. Likewise, respondents who were substituting out of choice rather than economic necessity tended to derive more satisfaction from the job than those for whom substitute teaching is the sole source of family income.

Although working conditions for substitute teachers vary markedly from board to board and from school to school, the following issues were raised by a substantial number of respondents.

1. Income

- Most respondents believe that they should be paid according to the grid after having worked two days. On average, substitute teachers do not receive grid status until they have worked at least three days. Some boards require teachers to work five days or more.
- Many respondents reported that their board does not sufficiently recognize their teaching experience for salary purposes.
- Income from substitute teaching tends to be unstable. Although school boards demand that substitute teachers be available, they do not guarantee them work.

2. Benefits

- Only 38 per cent of respondents receive medical and dental benefits. Many of those who receive such benefits want them improved or made more affordable.
- Most substitute teachers have no disability coverage in the event that they are injured.
- Substitute teachers rarely enjoy such other benefits as paid professional development days and sick days.
- Some substitutes believe that they should be compensated for expenses unique to their employment, such as travel time, mileage and cellphone fees.

3. Pension

- Substitute teachers would like their day-to-day teaching to qualify as pensionable service.
- Retired teachers would like the limit on the amount of service they can provide before their pension is reduced either removed or extended.

4. Relations with the School Board

- Substitute teachers sometimes receive inaccurate information about the nature of teaching assignments. In some cases, the problem is with the automated systems that boards use to notify substitute teachers. In other cases, school staff call substitutes directly and provide incomplete or inaccurate information.
- Board hiring practices are not always perceived as fair. Some respondents believe that boards give a disproportionate number of the longer, grid-based assignments to retired teachers rather than to younger teachers. Others believe that boards tend to stigmatize certain teachers as “substitutes” and, as a result, refuse to consider them for permanent employment. Still others believe that, to save money, boards prefer to give assignments to new graduates rather than to teachers with more experience.
- In some cases, substitute teachers have difficulty maximizing their hours, because they are given unrealistic back-to-back assignments (such as the morning in one school and the afternoon in another school that is a considerable distance from the first).
- A majority of respondents (77 per cent) were unsatisfied with the professional development opportunities available to them from the school board. Professional development in this context includes not only training but also constructive feedback on their teaching.
- A majority of respondents (55 per cent) did not receive adequate access to district e-mail.

5. Relations with the School

- Some schools neglect such basic considerations as providing substitutes with a parking spot, a brief tour of the school, a set of keys, access to computers, seating plans, and an overview of safety and other procedures.
- Substitutes are sometimes assigned extra supervisory and other duties to the point that they have no lunch or other breaks during the day.

6. Relations with the Association

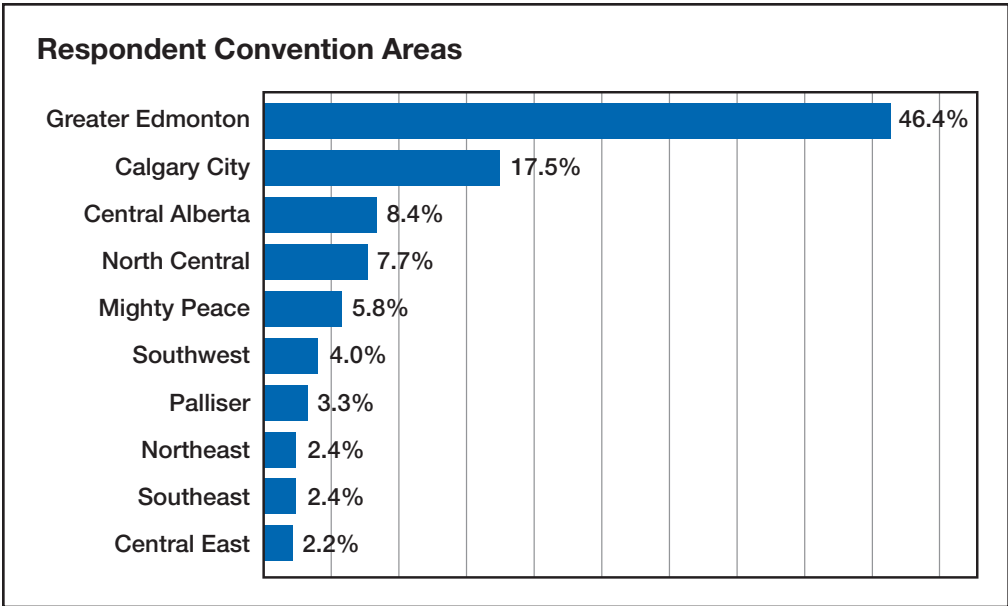
- Many respondents (60 per cent) reported being dissatisfied with the amount of communication they receive from the provincial ATA.
- Many respondents (60 per cent) reported being dissatisfied with the communication they receive from their ATA local.

The Experience of Substitute Teaching in Alberta Schools

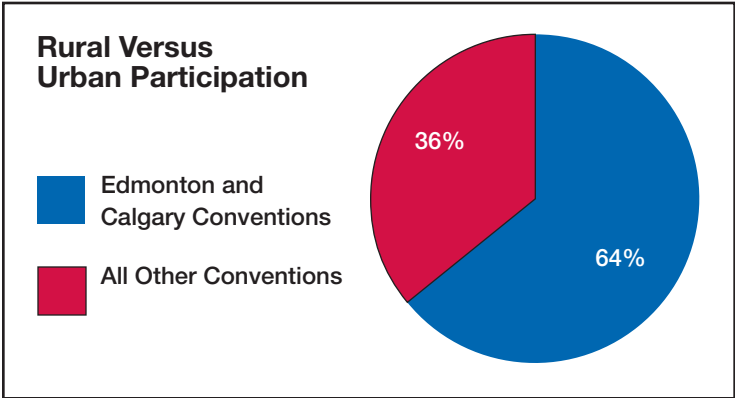
A. Survey Population

Highlights

- 64 per cent of respondents attended either the Greater Edmonton or the Calgary City teachers' convention.
- 75 per cent of respondents were female.
- 37 per cent of respondents were seeking full-time teaching positions.



Of the respondents, 64 per cent were from the Greater Edmonton and the Calgary City convention areas. Although a large number of respondents were from Edmonton (46.4 per cent), the sample approximates the rural-to-urban ratio of the general teaching population. The distribution also reflects the fact



that substitute teachers tend to be concentrated in urban areas. Cross-tab analyses indicate little variation between respondents from Greater Edmonton and those from other areas.

“If schools could but recognize, use and develop the tremendous talent resident in substitute teachers!”

— Survey respondent

B. Participant Profiles

Highlights

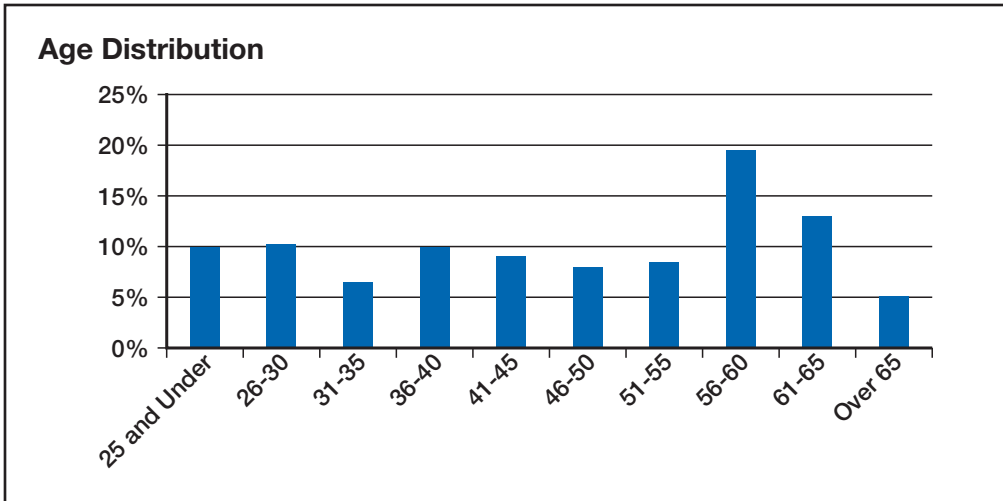
- Overall, teachers with 20 or more years of experience were more likely than younger teachers to report satisfaction with substitute teaching and with their relationships with colleagues.
- Most substitute teachers find their work satisfying and enjoy good relationships with students.

The 560 responses received suggest that substitute teachers’ experiences and their level of satisfaction vary dramatically. Some respondents reported that they rely heavily on substitute teaching as a source of income. Such teachers experience not only financial stress but also the challenge of coordinating their schedule so as to obtain as much work as possible. Other respondents reported trying—without success—to obtain a permanent position with their board. Still others, though less reliant on a full-time income from teaching, stated that they wanted better benefits and more recognition on the part of their board of their professional status. Substitute teachers who are retired or who are not the sole wage earner in the family can be more selective with respect to the number and location of the assignments they accept. Overall, respondents were satisfied with their relationships with their students (92 per cent) and with their workloads (83 per cent).

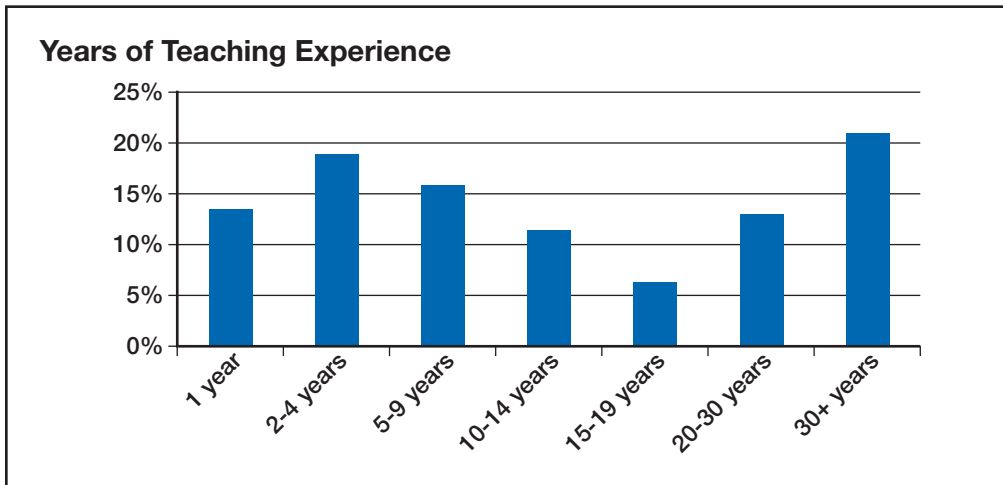
I possess abilities and expertise in my particular course areas that schools could access to improve the quality of instruction on sub days. Too many teachers leave videos or say, “Just hand out the worksheets I’ve provided for you—the students know what to do.” That is a sad loss for the students, the school and for the substitute teacher. If schools could but recognize, use and develop the tremendous talent resident in substitute teachers! ... [S]chools and subs should collaborate with classroom teachers ... for the betterment of all.

The largest group of respondents (35 per cent) were teaching in elementary schools, 7 per cent were teaching in junior high schools and 8 per cent in high schools. Many (24 per cent) reported teaching all grades or a combination of grades.

Approximately 25 per cent of respondents were 35 years of age or younger, while 38 per cent were near or past retirement age (55 or older). The data suggests that, while teachers of all ages and in all career stages are engaged in substitute teaching, the largest portion consists of older teachers. This distribution reflects broader demographic trends, both in teaching and in the general population.



With respect to teaching experience, the sample varied widely but quite consistently: 32 per cent of respondents were newer teachers having fewer than five years of experience. In keeping with the larger proportion of retirement-age teachers reported earlier, 34 per cent of respondents had 20 or more years of teaching experience.



C. Three Exemplars of Substitute Teachers

The following fictional teachers are representative of the three general types of substitute teacher.

Bob Kent is a 26-year-old beginning junior high school teacher. Last March, he moved back to the small city where he grew up, and he would very much like to get a continuing contract there. He has been substitute teaching to get his name and skills known around the district. So far, things have been going well, because Bob's partner works full-time and has good benefits. He's

getting somewhat anxious, though, because she will be going on maternity leave in five months, at which point he will become the sole breadwinner. Bob is still enthusiastic, and he hopes a full-time position will come his way soon.

Tabatha Mitchell is a high school science teacher. After taking a number of years off to care for her young children, she is once again enjoying teaching. Her teaching income helps the family, but she would like it to be more reliable. She earns more during some months than others and, of course, she receives no teaching income in the summer. Now that her oldest son needs braces, she also wishes she had more comprehensive benefits. However, she also enjoys the flexibility of being a substitute teacher. Although Tabatha loves her students, she wishes that her colleagues valued her teaching experience a bit more. In fact, she sometimes suspects that they don't think of her as a real teacher. She would like to be considered for a full-time temporary or probationary contract but feels that she has been labelled a "permanent" substitute teacher.

Claudia Smith retired two years ago after teaching in elementary schools for 32 years. She has a full pension, as does her husband, also a retired teacher. But Claudia missed teaching and thought that substitute teaching would keep her active and involved in the profession that she loved for so many years. She knows that some of her colleagues need their substitute teaching income and, as a result, take on any assignments they can get. Claudia feels fortunate that she has the option of choosing only assignments that are close to her home and that fit in with her schedule. Because she knows many teachers in the district, teaching helps her maintain social contacts while pursuing her passion for teaching.

D. Income, Benefits and Pension

Highlights

- A majority of respondents (62 per cent) are not receiving benefits.
- On average, respondents are placed on the grid after teaching three days. Most respondents believe that they should be eligible for grid pay after teaching two days.

Because substitute teachers are neither contract workers nor regular, salaried employees, they tend to experience significant issues with respect to their income and benefits. As one experienced teacher noted, "Substitute teachers should be considered employees of the board, not day-to-day contractors. This would be consistent with the views of Revenue Canada. Alternately, the ATA, school boards and the government should lobby Revenue Canada to treat substitute teachers as independent contractors and fund test cases to establish substitutes as contractors under the *Income Tax Act*." Another respondent put it this way: "Since I am not an 'employee' receiving benefits, holiday pay, guaranteed hours and professional development days, I should be classified as a contract worker so that I can claim some of these expenses on my income tax."

Income

Sixteen per cent of respondents expressed dissatisfaction with the income they receive from substitute teaching. One of their major concerns is that substitute teachers should be placed on the grid more quickly and that their years of teaching experience should be more fully recognized. Another significant concern is the instability of income derived from substitute teaching. One respondent, for example, commented on the paradox of “boards demanding availability yet not guaranteeing work.” Respondents who depend on substitute teaching as their main source of income tend to view the income gaps between permanent teachers and substitute teachers as acutely inequitable. One mid-career teacher who was working nearly full-time, for example, observed that her income was “significantly lower than the lowest-paid teacher on the grid (\$17,000 to \$19,000 less). ... Furthermore, [substitute teachers] have no benefits and no job security. [They] need contract positions that offer this stability if boards want to entice and keep substitutes.”

Many respondents remarked on the significant differences between boards in terms of what substitute teachers are paid and the conditions under which they work. A particularly sensitive issue is the number of days that a substitute teacher must work before being placed on the grid. Some boards place substitute teachers on the grid as early as the second day of substitute teaching, whereas others do not do so until the teacher has taught five or more days.

Benefits

Seventy-five per cent of respondents expressed an interest in either receiving benefits or improving the benefits already available to them. Of particular interest were affordable and reasonable medical and dental benefits. Only 38 per cent of respondents reported that they had access to benefits. Even when benefits were available, they were often too expensive for respondents or did not meet their needs.

Respondents also expressed an interest in receiving holiday pay, as well as paid professional development days and sick days. A number of participants also observed that they had no disability coverage. As one retired teacher put it, “It would be nice to be covered at least by Workers’ Compensation. Right now, if I get hurt on the job (say, teaching physical education) and am unable to work, I have no access to coverage.” Some respondents also sought benefits particular to substitute teaching, such as paid travel time, kilometrage and compensation for cellphone expenses.

Pension

A number of respondents stated that they would like to be able to contribute to a pension plan. In addition, a number of retired teachers without full pensions wanted to see the restriction removed on the number of days that they can work without having their pension reduced. As one respondent observed, “I cannot work more than 111 days a year without having my pathetic little pension clawed back. There is a chronic shortage of substitutes in my system, a problem that could be alleviated by getting rid of that 111-day limit.”

A particularly sensitive issue is the number of days that a substitute teacher must work before being placed on the grid.

Whether they were substitute teaching by necessity or by choice, respondents wanted more access to professional development.

E. District Relations

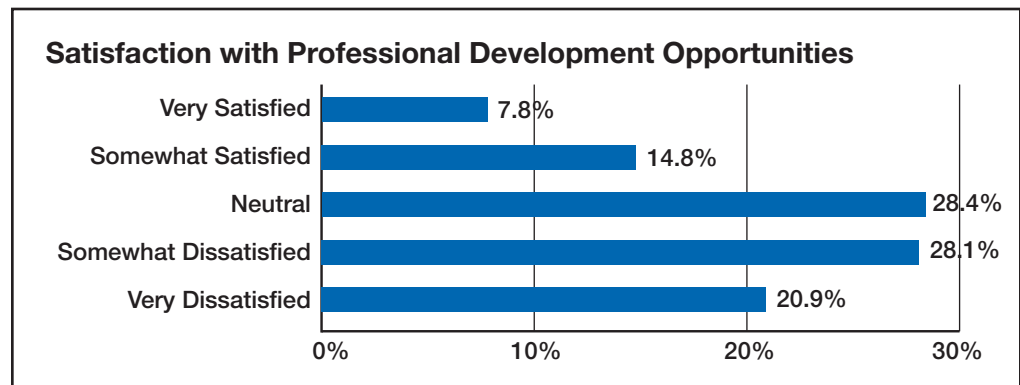
Highlights

- 46 per cent of respondents reported turning down assignments for which they did not feel qualified.
- 55 per cent of respondents were not satisfied with the access they had to district e-mail.
- 77 per cent of respondents were not satisfied with their access to professional development opportunities.

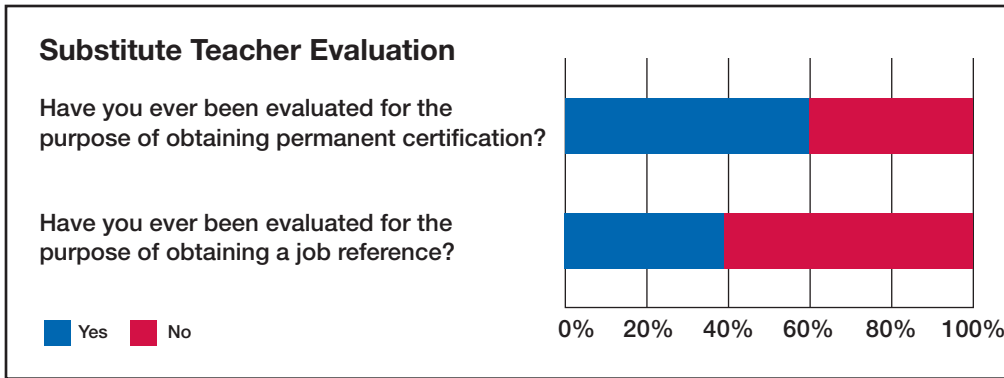
Because each district makes unique arrangements with its substitute teachers, working conditions and satisfaction tend to vary widely from jurisdiction to jurisdiction. Given that boards, rather than administrators, hire substitute teachers, the level of satisfaction that teachers experience with respect to their assignments tends to depend on how well the board communicates with its substitute teachers.

F. PD Funding and Access

Whether they were substitute teaching by necessity or by choice, respondents wanted more access to professional development. A number of teachers, for example, were unfamiliar with the Smart Board and wanted to be trained on how to use it. Many of those seeking permanent positions stated that they wanted to be evaluated and to receive ongoing professional development. Several respondents expressed a desire for paid professional development days. In some cases, substitute teachers were expected to pay for their own professional development. Many respondents reported feeling out of the loop with respect to professional development and wanted to receive communications about upcoming opportunities.



Professional development can also take the form of timely and constructive feedback on one's teaching practice. As one respondent commented, "If a complaint or call was made about a substitute teacher, [he or she] should be notified and given an opportunity to say his or her own part." Another early-career teacher was actively seeking feedback and evaluation for a full-time permanent position. While some substitute teachers are evaluated, many are not.



In general, participants tended to value ongoing professional development because it not only helped them become more effective teachers but also enhanced their sense of professionalism and acceptance within a district. As one teacher stated, “If you want good substitutes who can actually teach in a classroom and not just supervise, you need to train them and keep them trained. ... They should be treated like a school unto themselves and have monthly meetings and administrative and professional development days. Give them their due, and you’ll never be short of substitute teachers. There are people, like me, who enjoy the variety and challenges of substitute teaching as opposed to the demands of being a classroom teacher.”

G. Communication

Most concerns about communication centred on the need for a timely, accurate and accessible call-out system for informing substitute teachers about available assignments. According to participants, automated systems are not always accurate. Some respondents were unpleasantly surprised on more than one occasion when they accepted an assignment only to discover that it was not at all what they had been led to believe. Others suggested that districts could do a better job of informing substitute teachers about professional development and permanent employment opportunities.

H. Substitute Teaching Assignments

Respondents identified three main concerns about teaching assignments. The first involves scheduling conflicts that may prevent substitute teachers from maximizing their teaching time. In some cases, for example, boards give substitute teachers unrealistic back-to-back assignments (such as the morning in one school and the afternoon in another school several kilometres from the first). In addition to involving considerable travel time, these situations give the teacher little or no time to prepare for the next class. Faced with such an unrealistic scenario, the teacher may opt to accept the morning assignment only. A similar dilemma exists when, early in the week, a teacher is offered a half-day assignment for later in the week. If the teacher accepts the assignment, he or she is obliged to turn down a two- or three-day assignment should one be offered subsequently. On the other hand, if the teacher turns

“It is annoying for full-time subs like me to see retired teachers continually receive the grid assignments.”

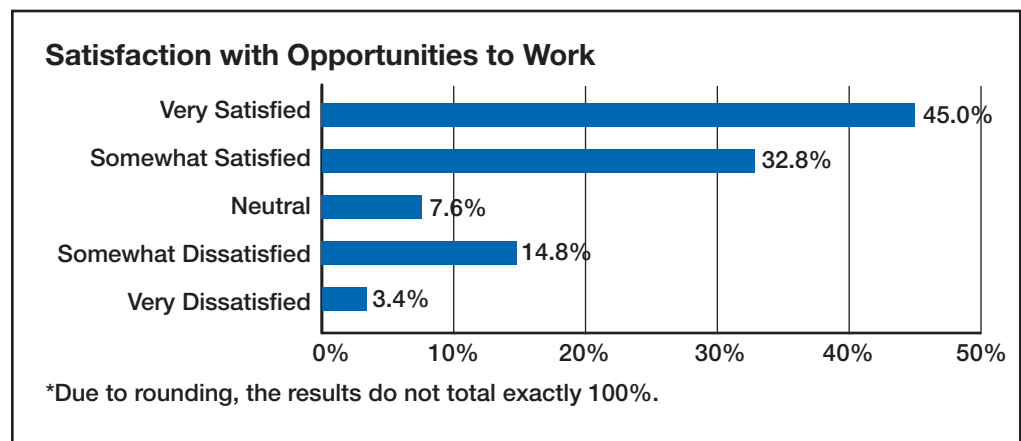
— Survey respondent

down the first assignment, he or she has no guarantee that another assignment will be forthcoming.

A second concern is that substitute teachers are frequently asked to take on assignments for which they do not feel qualified. Worse yet, they sometimes accept an assignment only to discover, once they get to the school, that it involves a subject area or a grade level different from what was described when they accepted the offer. Sometimes the miscommunication stems from problems inherent in the district office’s notification system. In other cases, however, the problem occurs at the school level. For example, a school staff member may call a substitute teacher directly and provide incomplete or inaccurate information about the assignment.

A third concern is the perception that some boards give retired teachers a disproportionate number of the longer-term (and, hence, grid-based) teaching assignments. This is a source of great resentment to those who rely on substitute teaching as their primary source of income. One respondent summed up the situation this way: “It is annoying for full-time subs like me to see retired teachers continually receive the grid assignments. Since retired teachers already receive a handsome pension, it would make sense that ... retired teachers be given single-day assignments only so that the longer-term jobs remain available for the teachers who actually need the money.”

Despite these concerns, respondents were, on the whole, satisfied with their opportunities to work. The willingness of a substitute teacher to accept an assignment was, not surprisingly, directly related to how badly he or she needed the income. Satisfaction with teaching opportunities was also closely linked to age and teaching experience: older and more experienced teachers were, in general, more satisfied than younger teachers with the opportunities available to them.



I. Transparency/Fairness in Hiring

Thirty-seven per cent of respondents stated that they hoped to obtain a full-time teaching position and, as a result, regarded substitute teaching as a temporary career. Forty-nine respondents (approximately 9 per cent of the sample) contended that school board practices with respect to hiring permanent teachers are not always fair or transparent.

I think the way certain boards do their hiring should be re-evaluated. How long must a good substitute teacher work before being considered for a contract? Eventually they will just become fed up and leave the profession.

I've been a substitute teacher for eight years, waiting to get hired by the school board (updating my résumé and application package every six months). ... How long is too long to wait? Does the school board still hire from the sub list? I've seen new teachers coming right out of university and getting hired within days. I've also heard that if you are a "good sub" the school board tries to keep you on the sub list. Is this true?

Respondents expressing these concerns, especially those who had substitute taught for a number of years, were deeply troubled and disappointed by their inability to obtain permanent employment. Among the reasons they cited for their failure to obtain a permanent position were (1) the stigmatization that attaches to those who have substitute taught for a period of time and renders them unlikely to be considered for permanent employment and (2) the possibility that school boards prefer to give permanent positions to recent graduates because they have little experience and, as a result, are less costly to hire.

Because substitute teachers seldom receive feedback on their work, have fewer collegial relationships than regular classroom teachers and have little access to ongoing professional development, a small number of those seeking permanent positions may, indeed, be falling through the cracks.

The survey reveals that a school board's practices and culture, particularly with respect to communications, can have a significant impact on the quality of work life of substitute teachers. According to respondents, school boards can help substitute teachers by adopting the following practices:

- Providing them with timely notice of substitute teaching opportunities
- Notifying them of opportunities to apply for permanent positions
- Informing them of professional development opportunities from a variety of sources
- Helping them to develop positive professional identities by connecting them with their colleagues
- Ensuring that they feel included and valued

"How long must a good substitute teacher work before being considered for a contract?"

— Survey respondent

School boards can help substitute teachers feel valued by offering them a fair compensation package that includes grid pay, benefits and paid professional development.

In addition to taking these positive measures, school boards can help substitute teachers feel valued by offering them a fair compensation package that includes grid pay, benefits and paid professional development.

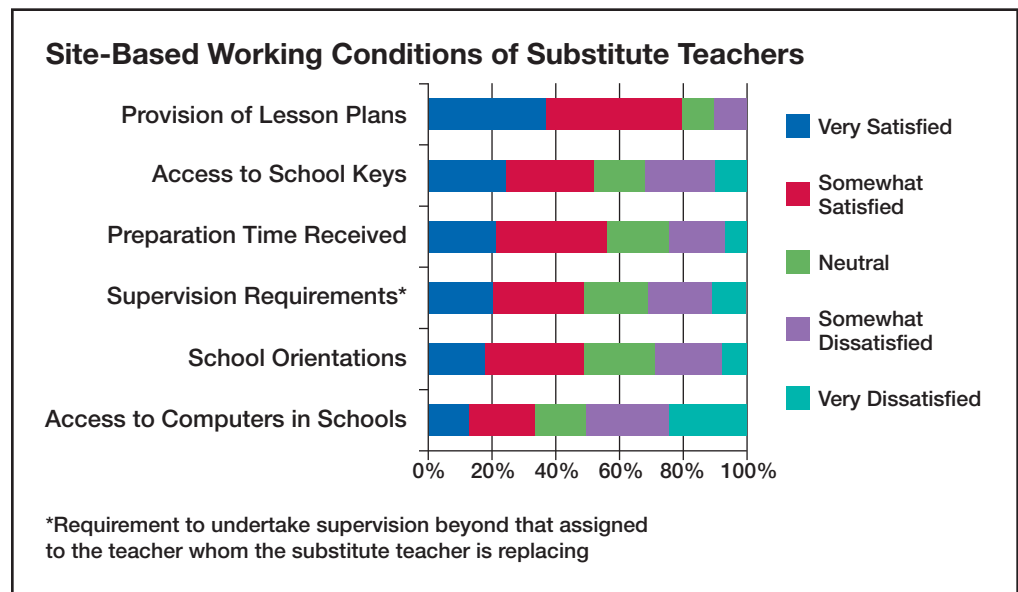
There is virtually no communication with the school board. Substitutes are not invited to any professional development. ... It is a lonely and unstable job position. [I] feel very underappreciated. I am trying very hard to obtain a contract. Substitutes are not made to feel a part of any team or department; you are just out on your own, in the dark.

J. On-Site Working Conditions

Highlights

- Basic considerations, like providing parking and a brief tour of the school, can help substitute teachers feel welcome and appreciated in a school.
- Some substitutes are assigned so much supervision and prep-period coverage that they don't have time to eat lunch or use the washroom.
- To function effectively, substitute teachers need to be given keys, granted computer access and introduced to safety guidelines.

Although school boards set the overall direction for substitute teachers' working conditions, the actions of individual schools make a great deal of difference in the quality of substitute teachers' experiences. Respondents had nothing but praise for schools in which they were treated well. In cases in which their experience was less positive, they suggested a number of ways in which schools could make substitute teachers feel more welcome.



K. Orientation and School Communication

If substitute teachers are to function effectively, they need to be oriented to the school. A good orientation can also help substitute teachers feel welcome and valued by their colleagues. The elements of a good orientation include information about where to park, accurate and advance information about teaching assignments, provision of a set of keys, information about the location of equipment, access to computers, time to review lesson plans and prepare for class, a seating plan, and information about students with special needs or behavioural issues.

A substitute teacher is powerless without a class list, a seating plan and/or a discipline policy consistent with the practices of the regular teacher. Although all teachers think their students are great, when a sub comes in, things change—and usually for the worse. If teachers could include these items, along with their lesson plan, things would run a little more smoothly for everyone. Also, knowing that the administration is supporting subs with discipline is huge! With their support, we feel more confident in the classroom.

L. Duties and Assignments

Eleven per cent of respondents expressed dissatisfaction with schools that treat their substitute teachers, for all intents and purposes, as “slaves for the day.” In many cases, substitute teachers are asked to take on duties beyond those normally assigned to the teacher they are replacing. Some respondents reported that they were asked to teach classes for which they felt neither qualified nor prepared. Still others expressed frustration at being asked to take on supervisory duties first thing in the morning, thereby losing the opportunity to review lesson plans before classes began.

[I am] often ... placed in other classes during preps so that other teachers can have a break. ... [I also feel] ... looked down on if I question whether it is right for another teacher on full salary to be given a break or whether I should have every spare minute filled because I am “just a substitute.” ... I think it is unfair that substitutes are made to do extra supervision so that other teachers can have time off. I sometimes feel that substitute teachers are not respected and regarded as teachers and are abused in some schools.

Some schools even ask the substitute teacher to use any spare blocks in the absent teacher’s schedule to cover for another teacher. As one teacher said, “Often I am assigned to two schools in one day.... [In addition,] I get extra supervision and have to cover other teachers’ classes while they get extra preparation time. I have no time to eat lunch or visit the bathroom.”

“I sometimes feel that substitute teachers are not respected and regarded as teachers and are abused in some schools.”

— Survey respondent

“We do not seem to be regarded as teachers or professionals in some schools.”

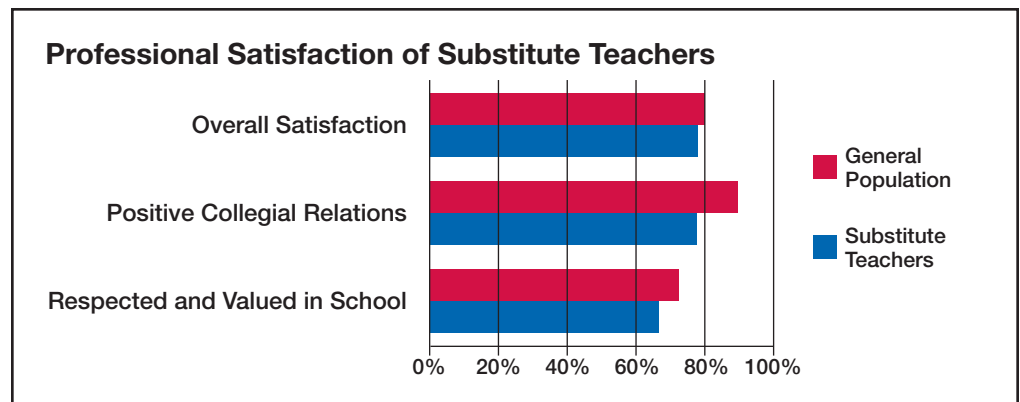
— Survey respondent

M. Administrative Support

Twenty respondents noted that the principal plays a key role in establishing a school’s professional climate. What substitute teachers particularly value in a principal is his or her willingness to provide them with backing in resolving discipline issues. As one teacher put it, “I think it is critical that the school administrator ‘pops in’ on every sub at least once per half day to reinforce to the students that ... their behaviour is being monitored.... This is a nice way to show the sub that he or she is being supported. It is also a good time to answer any procedural questions that the sub might have.” In addition to helping to maintain discipline, principals determine what constitutes fair and professional treatment of substitute teachers. Principals, for example, set the ground rules concerning the extent to which a visiting teacher can be assigned supervisory duties or extra classes.

N. Respect and Recognition

A considerable number of respondents commented that they receive little respect from their colleagues and often feel that their contributions are not fully appreciated. As one respondent observed, “We do not seem to be regarded as teachers or professionals in some schools. This is evidenced by the fact that we are given additional supervision, no real teaching to do, no professional development and no representation.” Another veteran teacher remarked, “Over the years, I have noticed a distinct decline in the professional attitude toward subs. I’ve even heard the comment, ‘I’ve a sub coming in. Does anyone have supervision they’d like covered? Poor sucker!’” This perception is corroborated by the ATA’s 2008 Member Opinion Survey, which revealed that substitute teachers are somewhat less satisfied than the general teaching population with the respect and recognition they receive.



In many cases, the concerns that substitute teachers raised about inadequate orientation to the school and inappropriate teaching assignments have a direct bearing on the well-being of students. Some respondents reported, for example, that they were asked to supervise students outdoors even though they had received no information about school rules. Others had been asked to teach classes (such as physical education) that they did not feel qualified to supervise. Still others expressed concern about what they would do in the event of a school lockdown, given that they had not received any keys, been granted computer access or been provided with information about safety procedures. Some respondents went so far as to point out that students are shortchanged when substitute teachers are shuffled from room to room, overworked, or left with poor or partial lesson plans that ask them to “babysit” students rather than teach them. As one respondent noted, the practice of assigning a substitute teacher, on the spur of the moment, to take over another teacher’s class so that the latter can have more prep time is not only an “educationally unsound practice” but also “a tough situation for both the substitute and the students.”

O. Relationships with the ATA

Highlights

- 60 per cent of respondents were not satisfied with the amount of communication they were receiving from the ATA.
- 60 per cent of respondents were not satisfied with the communications they were receiving from their ATA local.
- Teachers having five or more years of teaching experience tended to be more satisfied than less experienced teachers with the communication they were receiving from the ATA.

In general, relatively few respondents used the open-ended questions to comment on the ATA. Those who did, however, were of the view that the ATA can do more to advocate for and communicate with substitute teachers. One respondent remarked that “the ATA in general does little for the ‘fringe people’ such as substitutes, part-time teachers, retired teachers, and teachers on temporary or probationary contracts. More effort needs to be made to inform ... these people of their rights and responsibilities.” According to another, “Unfortunately, the ATA has never sufficiently considered the working conditions and compensation for substitute teachers. The time has arrived for them to do so.”

Students are shortchanged when substitute teachers are shuffled from room to room, overworked, or left with poor or partial lesson plans that ask them to “babysit” students rather than teach them.



Conclusions and Long-Term Implications

1. There is no typical substitute teacher. Responses to the survey suggest that substitute teachers are a diverse group and bring a wide range of experiences, needs and expectations to their work. The districts and schools they work for are equally diverse: some provide for their substitute teachers better than others, and some have more effective call-out and communication systems than others. Supply and demand also vary: some districts require a lot of substitute teachers whereas others do not.

Other things being equal, a substitute teacher's experience is ultimately determined by his or her needs and expectations. The teacher's life circumstances and career stage also play a role. For retired, pensioned teachers who do not rely on the income, substitute teaching is an enjoyable and rewarding way to remain active in the teaching profession. For some, working as a substitute teacher is a deliberate choice that, though not without its challenges, is generally rewarding. Many others, however, regard substitute teaching as just a stepping stone on the path to obtaining a permanent teaching position. Beginning and experienced teachers for whom this goal proves elusive may find themselves professionally frustrated and financially constrained, especially if they have to substitute teach for extended periods of time.

2. Substitute teachers feel that their working conditions are less favourable than those of permanent teachers. In addition to being aware of the inequities between their working conditions and those of permanent teachers in the same district, substitute teachers realize that compensation for substitute teachers varies from one jurisdiction to another. For substitute teachers, compensation is a matter not just of money but also of professional respect. Many substitute teachers interpret lower compensation and questionable employment practices (such as paying a teacher for a quarter of a day) as an indication that the district regards them as "second-class citizens."

Principals are recommending to teachers that they avoid employing the same sub on consecutive days because subs are now placed on the grid on the second day and will cost more.

Sometimes supply teachers are taken off a [multiple-day] assignment so that they do not get grid pay. Also, instead of being paid for either a half-day or a full-day, supply teachers are paid by the teaching block.

3. Lack of transparency in hiring practices can be a barrier for substitute teachers who are seeking a permanent position. Many boards have no transparent, formal system for evaluating substitute teachers. In such districts, substitute teachers whose teaching practice is below standard can teach for years without receiving any meaningful feedback and may be shuffled around the district endlessly, never achieving any

For substitute teachers, compensation is a matter not just of money but also of professional respect

Because regular staff in most schools are extremely busy, substitute teachers can easily fall through the cracks.

insight with respect to their failure to obtain a permanent position. The absence of transparent hiring procedures can also be a barrier to experienced teachers attempting to return to the profession after a sustained period of absence. Such teachers may face age discrimination as well as what one teacher termed “grid discrimination.” Consistent professional development opportunities and a chance to receive feedback on their teaching practice would benefit not only teachers who feel in the dark about their inability to obtain a permanent position but all substitute teachers.

- 4. Substitute teachers want to feel welcomed, respected and valued by their colleagues.** Because regular staff in most schools are extremely busy, substitute teachers can easily fall through the cracks. They may, for example, receive no information about where to park, no class list and no orientation concerning school practices. Schools could quite easily rectify these omissions by developing an orientation protocol and designating a member of staff to ensure that substitute teachers are welcomed and provided with the tools they need to carry out their assignment. School practices that respondents labelled “unfair,” “demeaning” and “abusive” call for sterner measures. Examples of such practices include failing to provide substitute teachers with breaks and preparation time, requiring them to use their preparation time to carry out such routine administrative tasks as filing, failing to ensure that students treat substitute teachers respectfully and directing substitute teachers to “babysit” students rather than teach them—in short, any behaviours that make substitute teachers feel like “third class citizens.”

The school’s administration establishes the overall professional tone for the way in which substitute teachers are treated and determines the orientation protocol. Respondents emphasized that their experience of substitute teaching tends to be much more pleasant when they feel that the school administrator is their ally. One experienced teacher observed that younger teachers may be less assertive because they are often hoping to obtain a permanent position. A tactful administrator, in such cases, might quietly encourage the younger teacher to approach an administrator or lead teacher for support and guidance.

- 5. Compensation practices vary widely from district to district.** Substitute teachers are compensated at different rates depending on the district in which they teach. Some districts place substitute teachers on the grid after two days of teaching, whereas others require five days. Some districts offer benefits; most do not. Some boards pay teachers for mileage and provide allowances for professional development; others do not.
- 6. A range of benefit options could better meet the diverse needs of substitute teachers.** One of the most frequently expressed concerns in the survey is the lack of benefits for substitute teachers. In addition to going without medical and dental benefits, many substitutes have no access to disability insurance, paid sick days or paid professional development days. Another finding is that jurisdictions vary widely in the benefits that they offer to substitute teachers. Even jurisdictions that *do* offer benefits

seldom provide them in a manner that renders them accessible to substitute teachers. Given their limited income, for example, many substitute teachers cannot afford benefits if the only option available is the same benefit package provided to full-time teachers.

- 7. Substitute teachers desire greater involvement in professional development opportunities.** A significant number of respondents to the survey stated that their school board could do more in the way of informing them of professional development opportunities and helping them to grow professionally.

For Further Reading

Alberta Teachers' Association (ATA). 2009. *Substitute Teachers (Professional Replacements): Integration into the School System*. Edmonton, Alta: ATA.

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Canadian Teachers' Federation (CTF). 2007. *Substitute Teacher Compensation and Representation*. Ottawa, Ont: CTF. Available at www.ctf-fce.ca/private/Library/docs/Publications/Bulletin/emsb-2007-1.pdf (accessed October 16, 2009).

Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario (ETFO). 2009. *Advice for ETFO Occasional Teachers*. etfo-ot.net/Site/?cat=153 (accessed October 16, 2009).

Appendix A



The Alberta Teachers' Association

Substitute Teachers Survey—2008

To help improve its services to substitute teachers, the Association is interested in your experiences as a substitute teacher. Please take a few minutes to complete this survey. *All responses will be kept confidential.*

A. Current Teaching and Learning Conditions

1. Use the scale below to indicate your degree of satisfaction with the following working conditions associated with substitute teaching

General teaching and working conditions	Please click on the appropriate number				
	Very satisfied	Somewhat satisfied	Neutral	Somewhat dissatisfied	Very dissatisfied
a. Number of opportunities to substitute teach	1	2	3	4	5
b. Overall workload and expectations for substitute teaching	1	2	3	4	5
c. The provision of lesson plans left for me	1	2	3	4	5
d. Amount of preparation I receive	1	2	3	4	5
e. Orientation to the school(s) in which I substitute teach	1	2	3	4	5
f. Requirement to supervise beyond the regular assignment of the teacher I am replacing	1	2	3	4	5
g. Access to computer technology in the schools	1	2	3	4	5
h. Access to school keys	1	2	3	4	5
i. Access to professional development	1	2	3	4	5
Availability of information					
j. Access to the school district's e-mail	1	2	3	4	5
k. Access to a school mailbox	1	2	3	4	5
l. Access to school/district handbooks containing class lists, student information, and lockdown and other procedures	1	2	3	4	5
m. Access to the <i>ATA News</i> , the <i>ATA Magazine</i> and other provincial ATA materials	1	2	3	4	5
n. Access to information from my ATA local	1	2	3	4	5

B. Your Individual Views on Improvements for Substitute Teaching

The following questions ask your opinion about how your substitute teaching experience might be improved.

2 a) How many days do you have to substitute before you are placed on your appropriate grid pay level?
a. 1 day
b. 2 days
c. 3 days
d. 4 days
e. 5 days

2 b) After how many days do you believe you should receive grid pay level?
a. 1 day
b. 2 days
c. 3 days
d. 4 days
e. 5 days

	Please click on the appropriate response	
3 a) Do you have access to benefits in your collective agreement?	Yes	No
3 b) Are benefits something you would be interested in receiving?	Yes	No

4. How far is it reasonable to travel (one way) for a substitute teaching assignment if mileage were provided?
a. 0–20 kilometres
b. 21–40 kilometres
c. 41–60 kilometres

5. Are you currently looking for a full-time job?
a. Yes
b. No

6. Are you aware of other substitute teachers being hired by the board for full- or part-time contracts?
a. Yes
b. No

7 a) Have you been evaluated, during your teaching career, for the purpose of achieving permanent certification?
a. Yes
b. No

7 b) Have you been evaluated, during your teaching career, for the purpose of a job reference?
a. Yes
b. No

8. Have you declined assignments because you were called to teach in areas for which you are not qualified?

a. Yes

b. No

9. Summarize any general concerns that you have about substitute teaching on which you believe the Association should take action.

C. Your Overall Satisfaction with Substitute Teaching

10. Using the scale below, indicate your level of agreement with each of the following statements:

	Please click on the appropriate number				
	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
a. Substitute teaching brings me great satisfaction	1	2	3	4	5
b. I have positive interactions with my teaching colleagues	1	2	3	4	5
c. I work in a safe environment free from harassment	1	2	3	4	5
d. I have positive relationships with students	1	2	3	4	5
e. I have positive relationships with parents	1	2	3	4	5
f. I feel valued and respected in the schools in which I substitute teach	1	2	3	4	5

D. Demographic Data

Check (✓) only one response to each of the following questions. The information will not be used to identify you.

11. Which teachers' convention do you attend?

a. Mighty Peace

b. Northeast

c. North Central

d. Greater Edmonton

e. Central East

f. Central Alberta

g. Palliser

h. Calgary City

i. South West

j. Southeast

12. Your years of teaching experience, including the current year
a. 1 year
b. 2 to 4 years
c. 5 to 9 years
d. 10 to 14 years
e. 15 to 19 years
f. 20 to 30 years
g. Over 30 years

13. Your years of substitute teaching experience, including the current year
a. 1 year
b. 2 to 4 years
c. 5 to 9 years
d. 10 to 14 years
e. 15 to 19 years
f. 20 to 30 years
g. Over 30 years

14. Your current substitute teaching assignments are mainly related to students in
a. ECS/Kindergarten
b. Grades 1-6
c. Grades 7-9
d. Grades 10-12
e. Combinations
f. All grades

If you chose combinations, please specify:	
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15. Your age:
a. 25 and younger
b. 26–30 years old
c. 31–35 years old
d. 36–40 years old
e. 41–45 years old
f. 46–50 years old
g. 51–55 years old
h. 56–60 years old
i. 61–65 years old
j. Over 65

16. Your gender:
a. Female
b. Male

Thank you for completing this survey.



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