

# Substitute Teachers in Alberta: A Research Report



AN ATA RESEARCH UPDATE: OCTOBER 2011

[www.teachers.ab.ca](http://www.teachers.ab.ca)



The Alberta Teachers' Association

© Copyright 2011

*Unauthorized use or duplication without prior approval is strictly prohibited.*

ISBN 978-1-927074-03-9

*The Alberta Teachers' Association*

11010 142 Street NW, Edmonton, AB T5N 2R1

Telephone 780-447-9400 or 1-800-232-7208

[www.teachers.ab.ca](http://www.teachers.ab.ca)

# Table of Contents

<b>Preface</b> .....	3
<b>Introduction</b> .....	4
Background .....	4
Participant Profiles .....	5
<i>Years of Teaching Experience</i> .....	5
<i>Convention Area</i> .....	5
<i>Teaching Assignment(s)</i> .....	7
<b>Support from Schools</b> .....	8
Orientation and School Procedures .....	8
<i>Safety Information</i> .....	8
<i>School Policies</i> .....	9
<i>Access to Technology</i> .....	9
Welcoming the Substitute Teacher .....	10
<i>The Role of the Administrator</i> .....	11
<i>The School Climate</i> .....	11
<b>Support from Districts</b> .....	14
Call-Out Systems for Substitute Teaching Assignments .....	14
<i>Half-Day Assignments</i> .....	16
<i>Appropriate Assignments</i> .....	16
Hiring Practices .....	16
<i>Getting an Evaluation</i> .....	17
<i>Failure to Get a Permanent Position</i> .....	18
Professional Development Opportunities.....	19
Compensation.....	20
<i>Grid Pay</i> .....	20
<i>Sufficient Work</i> .....	22
<i>Travel</i> .....	22
<i>Benefits</i> .....	22
<i>Pensions</i> .....	23
Tensions Between Early-Career and Retired Teachers.....	23

<b>Support from the Alberta Teachers' Association</b> .....	25
<b>Analysis and Conclusion</b> .....	27
Labour Oversupply and Mismatch .....	27
<i>Supply and Demand</i> .....	27
<i>Callout Systems and Distribution of Substitute Teaching Assignments</i> .....	27
<i>Hiring Substitute Teachers for Permanent Positions</i> .....	28
Collective Bargaining Issues .....	28
Leadership .....	28
Communications.....	29
<i>District Communications</i> .....	29
<i>School Communications</i> .....	29
<i>Alberta Teachers' Association Communications</i> .....	29
<b>References</b> .....	30
<b>Appendix A: The Survey Instrument</b> .....	31

## 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 2010. It is a follow-up to a study that the Association conducted in the fall of 2008 and reported on in a publication entitled *The Experience of Substitute Teaching in Alberta Schools: A Research Report*.

The study suggests that, likely as the result of funding cutbacks, the conditions in which substitute teachers teach have, if anything, deteriorated in the two years since the first study was undertaken. Among the problems cited are a lack of transparency in some jurisdictions with respect to how teachers are hired; poor school-orientation practices; lack of access to technology; the assignment of excessive supervisory duties to substitutes; and marked discrepancies between substitute teachers and regular classroom teachers with respect to such matters as pay, benefits and access to professional development opportunities. This survey also suggests that, at least in some jurisdictions, there is more tension now than in the past between early-career substitute teachers and retired teachers who return to substitute teaching on a part-time basis.

An online survey such as the one employed in this study cannot begin to capture the full range of issues that substitute teachers encounter on a daily basis. However, the Association hopes that this report will give education stakeholders a deeper appreciation of the vital role that substitute teachers play in Alberta's schools and will 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. Thank you as well to the many substitute teachers who took the time to respond to this survey. Finally, a sincere thank you to the following ATA staff: Associate Coordinator—Research J-C Couture, who coordinated the study; Executive Staff Officer Kurt Moench, who provided valuable feedback on the final report; and Administrative Officer Harlan James, who helped prepare the report for publication.

*Gordon R Thomas*  
*Executive Secretary*

# Introduction

The Canada Council on Learning (CCL 2008) reports that, in the course of his or her schooling from kindergarten to Grade 12, a student may spend the equivalent of up to one full year under the tutelage of substitute teachers. Factors contributing to the increasing use of substitute teaching include more teacher absences, budget cutbacks and fiscal volatility. Taken together, these factors lead to a greater use of contingent labour, including both part-time and temporary teachers (Young and Brooks 2004).

Although substitute teachers contribute to the stable, day-to-day functioning of schools, very little literature exists that addresses their conditions of practice or their status relative to permanent teachers. A recent literature review by Duggleby and Badali (2007) suggests that the marginalization of substitute teachers is persistent and that the factors contributing to this situation are systemic and difficult to resolve. This study will explore some of those factors as they affect substitute teachers in Alberta schools.

## Background

*I enjoy substitute teaching. I believe that it is a necessary and valid form of teaching. It takes creativity and skill to walk in and teach different classes every day.*

Conducted in 2010, this study of Alberta's substitute teachers is a follow-up to a similar survey that the Alberta Teachers' Association (ATA) undertook in 2009. The survey was administered online. A copy of the survey instrument, which was available from October 17 to December 20, 2010, on a site hosted by the University of Alberta, is contained in Appendix A. A total of 607 people responded to the 2010 survey. Of these, 78.2 per cent were female, a portion that corresponds to the gender makeup of the general teaching population.

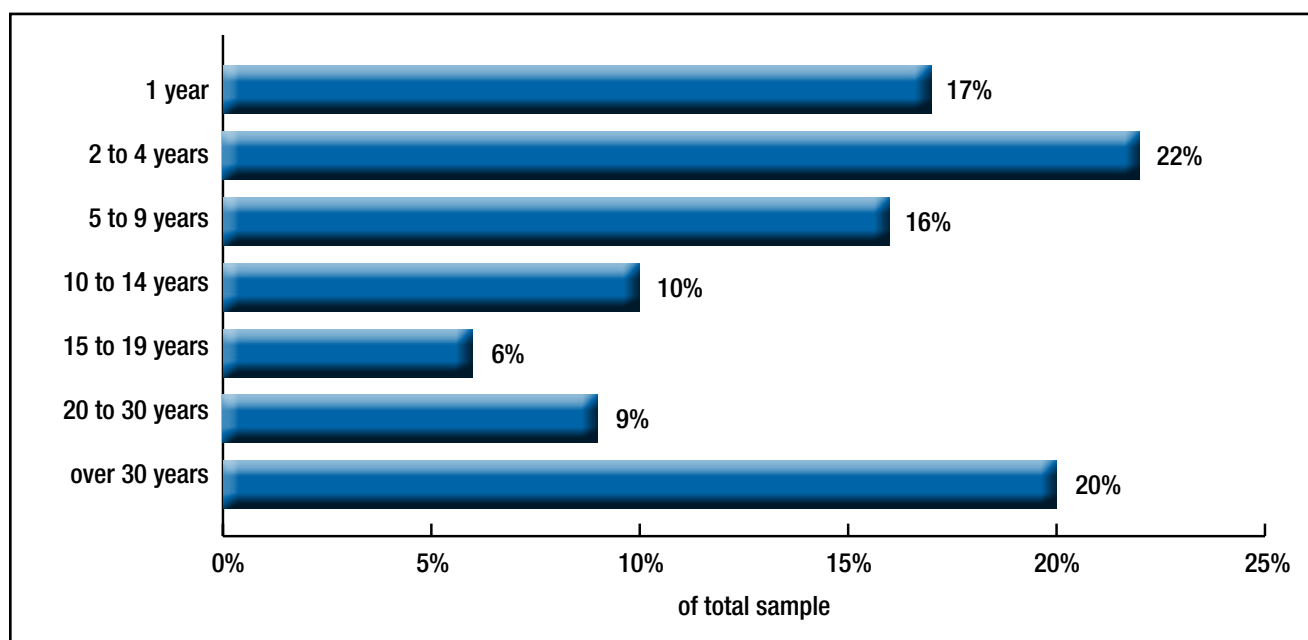


Figure 1: Years of Teaching Experience



## Participant Profiles

### Years of Teaching Experience

As Figure 1 shows, the sample contained a mix of relatively inexperienced teachers and teachers who had likely retired from full-time teaching and were now working as substitute teachers. Early-career teachers seeking permanent positions and retired teachers have different reasons for substitute teaching. Competition between these groups for teaching assignments can be a source of tension, an issue that will be discussed in more depth later.

Approximately 62 per cent of the study respondents were early-career teachers (defined as those having fewer than five years of teaching experience). Substitute teachers with the most teaching experience (20 years or more) appear to be more satisfied with their conditions of practice than their less-experienced colleagues. They are also less likely to commute long distances for teaching assignments and are more likely to feel respected and valued in their role as substitute teachers. Only 6.3 per cent of substitute teachers with more than 20 years of teaching experience reported that they were looking for full-time teaching positions, a finding

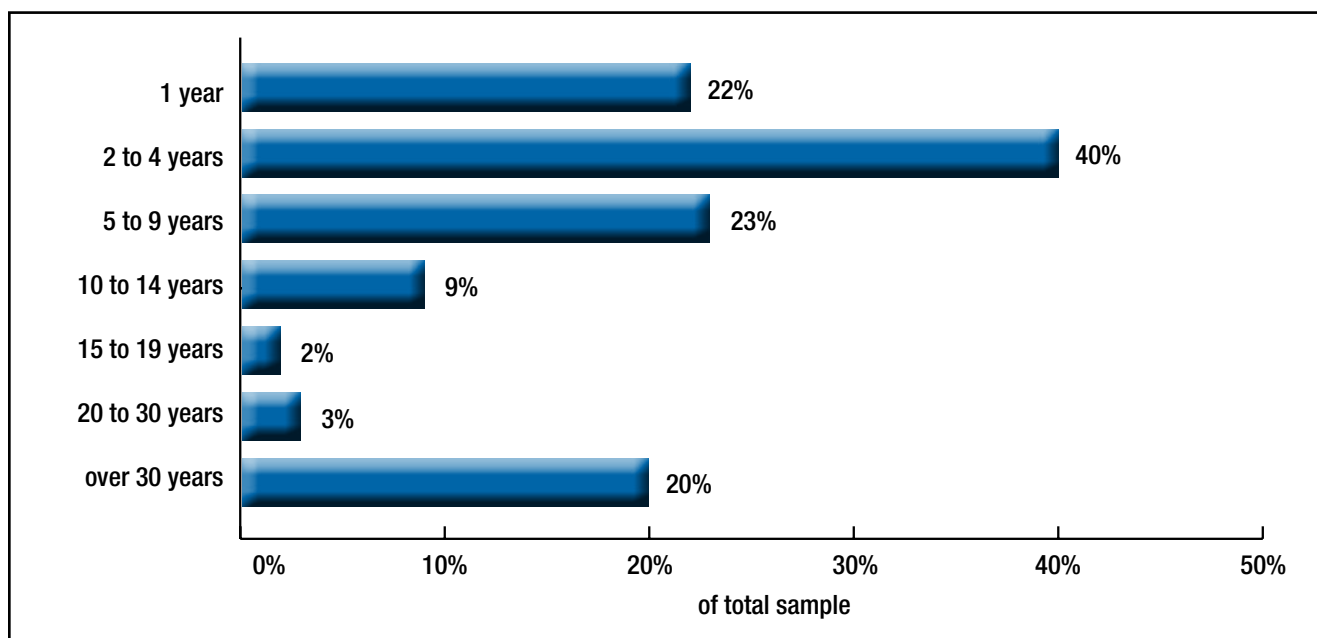
that suggests that their tendency to report greater satisfaction may be related to a sense of personal agency. In other words, for highly experience teachers, substitute teaching is a choice rather than an economic necessity resulting from the inability to find a full-time teaching position.

An analysis of the data in terms of years of experience as a substitute teacher (see Figure 2) reveals no correlation with level of satisfaction.

### Convention Area

As Figure 3 shows, almost half (49 per cent) of study respondents came from the Calgary teaching convention area.

To compensate for an overrepresentation of responses from Calgary, the survey data were weighted. The weighting scheme was based on the number of delegates (that is, the number of teachers) in each convention area, which was used as a proxy for the number of substitute teachers. The weighting scheme resulted in weights between 0.5 and 3.68. With the exception of the demographic data shown in Figure 3, all results are based on weighted data. The qualitative data in the form of respondents' comments was not similarly adjusted.



**Figure 2: Years of Experience Substitute Teaching**

## 6 • Substitute Teachers in Alberta: A Research Report

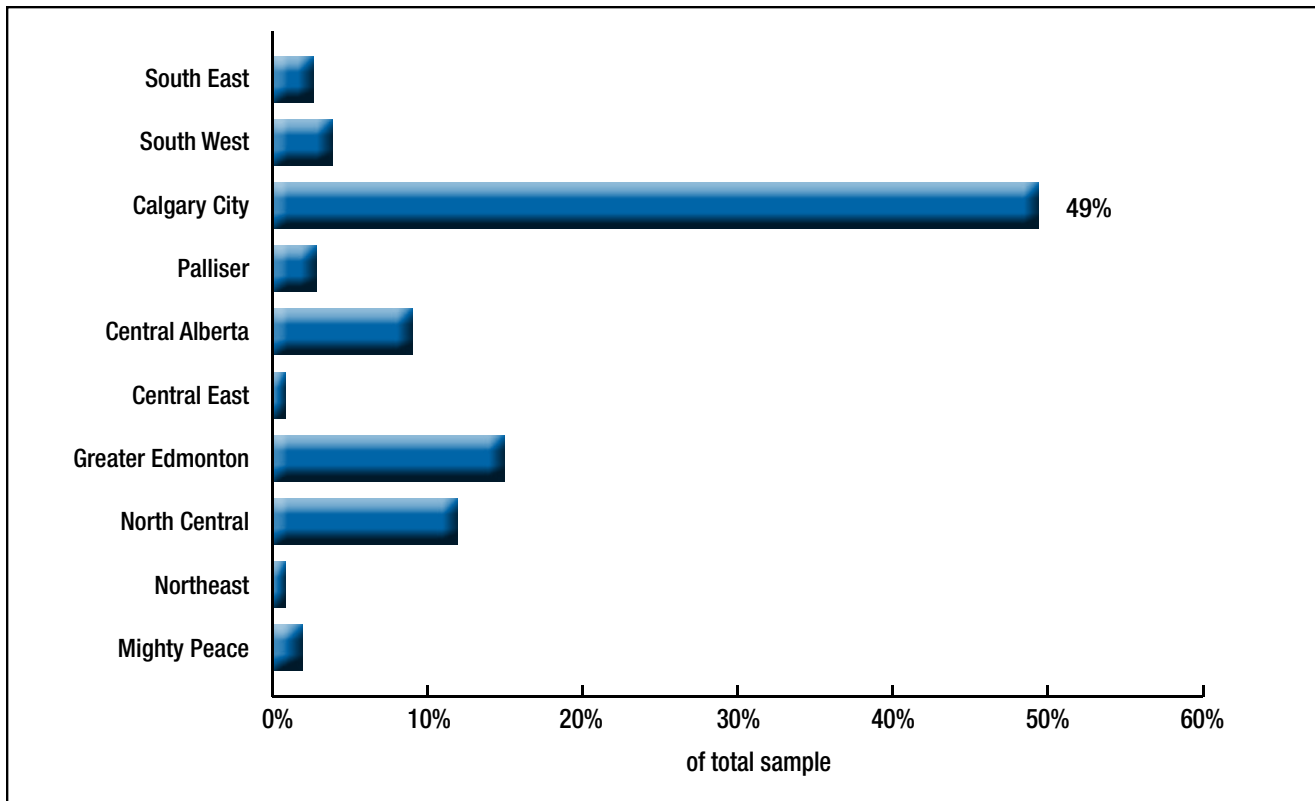


Figure 3: Teachers' Convention Area (Raw Data)

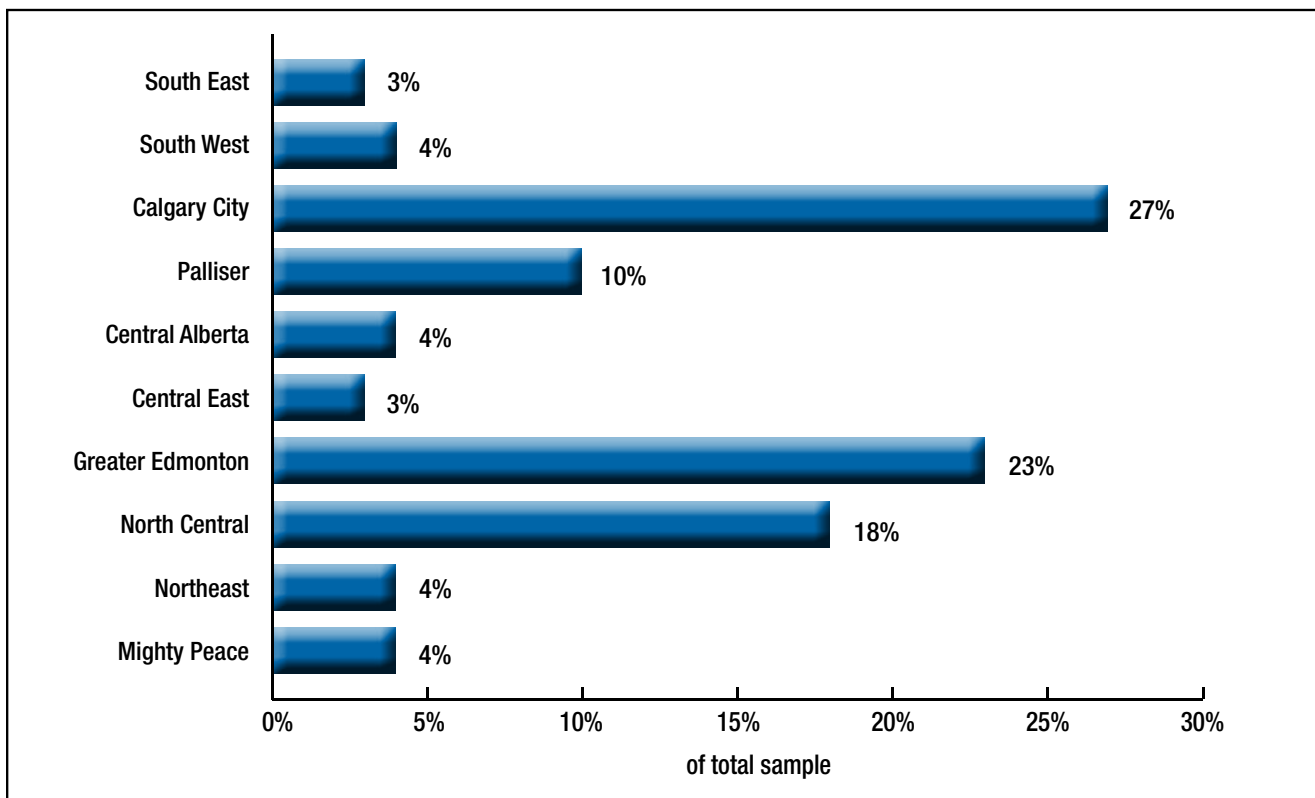
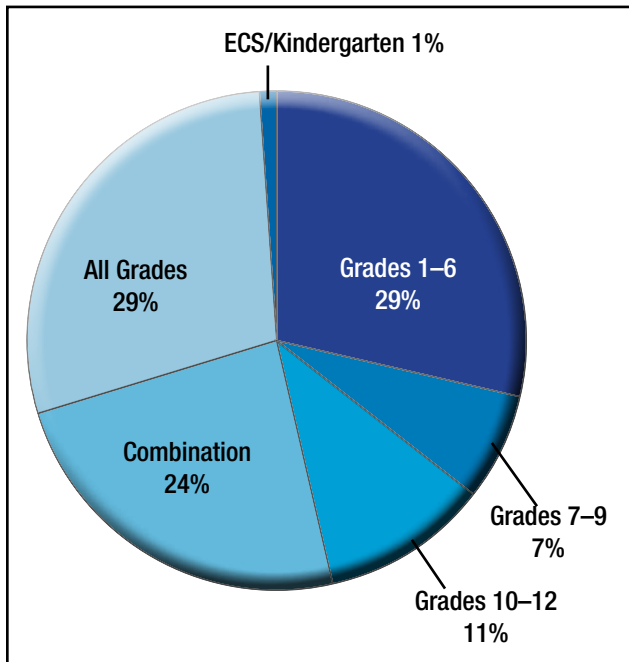


Figure 4: Weighted Sample Distribution by Teachers' Convention



### Teaching Assignment(s)



**Figure 5: Respondents by Most Frequent Teaching Assignment(s)**

# Support from Schools

One of the most frequently cited concerns expressed by respondents was conditions of practice in schools. Most respondents were satisfied with their teaching assignments, workloads and the quality of the lesson plans left for them by the teacher they were replacing. In general, substitute teachers also reported enjoying good relationships with students. With the exception of these factors, however, respondents ranked their conditions of practice as only somewhat positive. Compared with teachers on continuing contracts, substitute teachers reported less favourable conditions of practice. Respondents were especially dissatisfied with school-orientation practices, access to technology and excessive supervision duties.

## Orientation and School Procedures

Only about half of the respondents expressed satisfaction with the orientation practices carried out in schools. Many schools fail to provide a thorough orientation for their substitute teachers, and some schools neglect to provide substitute teachers with information about where to park, a map of the school, a student seating plan or keys to the classroom.

## Safety Information

Failing to provide substitute teachers with keys is not only an inconvenience but also, as many respondents noted, a safety issue. Having keys and knowing appropriate procedures are essential in the event of an emergency.

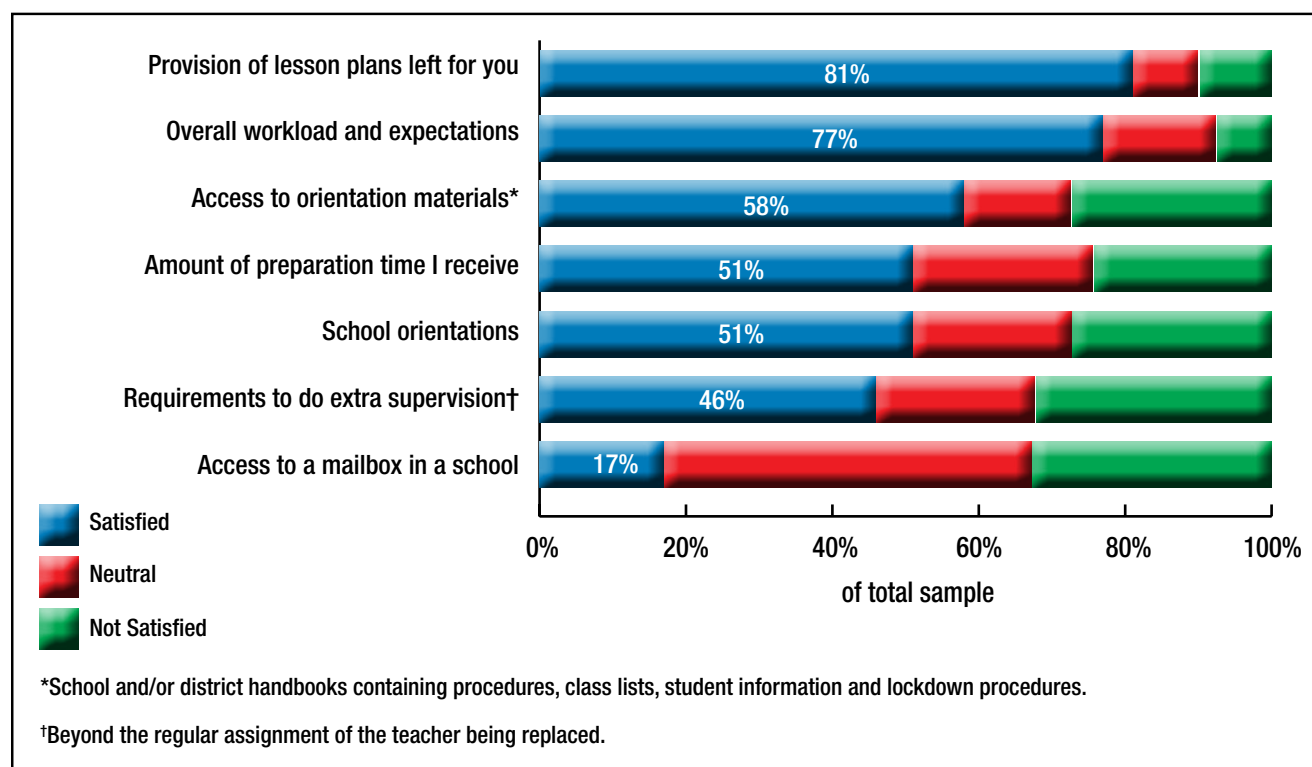


Figure 6: Satisfaction with Support from School

### School Orientation

- “When you are a guest in the building, dealing with an emergency can be quite challenging if you are not equipped with adequate information. How can we keep the children safe if we are not given proper information? I have worked in only two schools that provided me with lockdown/emergency procedures.”
- “Many times we walk into schools without having been introduced to staff or administrators. As a result, we are not sure whom to call if there are incidents in the classroom. As well, orientation with respect to procedures such as lockdown, fire drill and discipline are usually left for substitutes to figure out as they go along. Orientation should occur before we step into a classroom.”
- “Callouts often lack specific information, such as where to park, whether supervision will be required (so that we can bring proper clothing) and whether a computer will be needed or accessible. Many schools provide little or no orientation with respect to rules governing cell phone use and other matters.”
- “[Substitute teachers] are usually not familiar with school procedures, nor do they know the school floor plan, the students, the behavioural expectations or what to do in case of problems.”

*Not having keys is a great concern to me, if only so that I can lock the classroom door in the event of a lockdown. I have been unaware of the specific lockdown procedures in many of the schools in which I have worked because there was no handbook or other material provided. I understand that e-mail is to be used to communicate attendance and numbers to the office in the event of a lockdown. However, none of the substitutes in my division have access to e-mail accounts.*

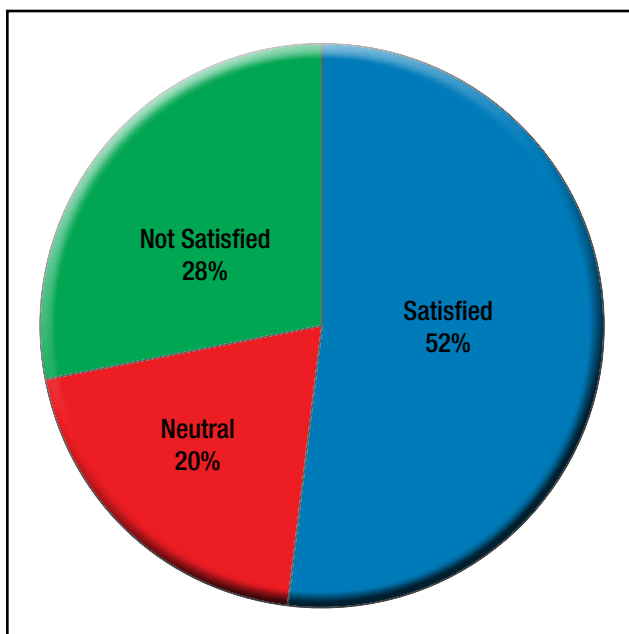
A number of respondents stated that appropriate safety information was “hit and miss”; some schools provided it whereas others did not.

### School Policies

Respondents were often ill informed about other important school policies. Although many substitute teachers are asked, with little or no notice, to supervise students, they may not be acquainted with the school’s rules. “Many times,” one teacher noted, “school staff do not provide information about [rules], or the information is very vague. Most times, you do not have enough time to familiarize yourself with individual school rules.” Others noted that schools vary widely in their practices, a situation that can be difficult for substitutes. One teacher suggested that “it would be nice if all schools followed the same procedures and if each school division put on a half-day or a one-day inservice ... that went through supervision duties, etc.” Another teacher stated, “I would *love* to see each substitute have a district contact should there ever be an immediate issue.”

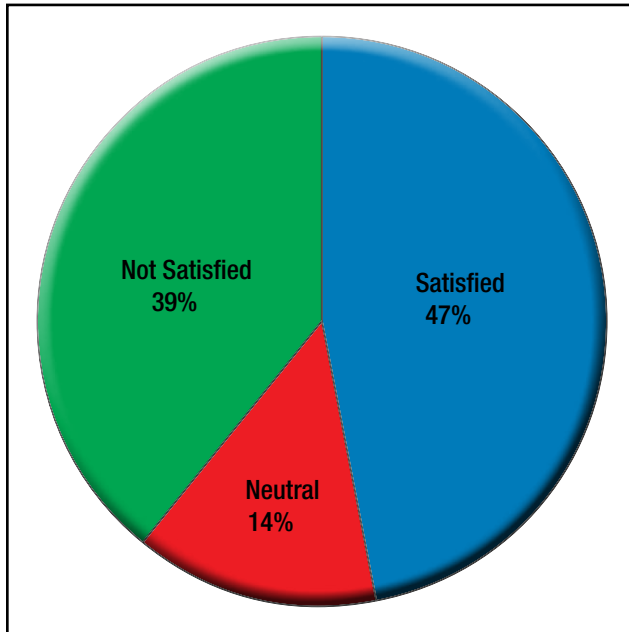
### Access to Technology

Access to technology appears to be another area in which schools are failing to provide for substitute teachers. Because most teachers now use laptops, substitute teachers may be left in classrooms with no computer access. A number of survey respondents specifically mentioned that they needed access to the schools’ computers and network to send e-mails, retrieve student information and access lesson-planning software.



**Figure 7: Access to School Keys**

*Although I love the fact that teachers have laptops that they can take with them, this leaves me with no access to a computer. As a result, I have no access to e-mail or resources. I recently accepted a three-day assignment for which there were no sub plans and was very lucky to have access to a computer to throw together lesson plans (with an hour's notice). This was one of the few times I had a computer.*



**Figure 8: Access to Computer Technology in Schools**

Without computer access, substitute teachers cannot use Smart Boards that now stand at the front of most classrooms in Alberta. As one substitute teacher proficient with this technology commented, “I have a good deal of experience with Smart Boards and other technology but cannot use the computer-based stuff if I cannot log on to a computer.” Other teachers agreed, noting that Smart Board training and access would improve their teaching.

### Welcoming the Substitute Teacher

In addition to providing needed information and equipment, effective orientations help substitute teachers feel welcomed and valued. Here is one teacher’s attempt to describe specific practices that make substitute teachers feel either welcome or unwelcome in schools:

*There is tremendous variation among schools as to how guest teachers are welcomed. In some schools, office staff welcome you, have already entered your name and job number, and hand you the attendance and other documents. In others, office staff do not even look up from their computers to acknowledge your presence when you say “good morning.” Sometimes keys are offered and rooms already open and ready. Other times you have to walk down several hallways and corridors only to find that the classroom door is locked. You then have to make a long trek back to the office and wait for someone to come up with a key or open the door for you. In most cases, lesson plans are excellent and easy to follow. Occasionally, they are skimpy or nonexistent.*

Here is how another teacher described the ideal school:

*Some schools have a general binder for substitutes, in addition to individual teacher lesson plans. Subs can access this binder to find class lists, seating plans and information on attendance procedures, fire drills and lockdown. These schools also provide visitor passes, keys, laptops and an orientation to the schools. These schools make me want to come back as a sub; they make me feel welcome and appreciated.*

From their comments, here is what substitute teachers would like to receive when they accept a teaching assignment:

- Information about parking in advance of the placement
- A warm, professional welcome, preferably from a school administrator
- An orientation binder or documents containing the following information:
  - A school map
  - Emergency procedures
  - Discipline and supervision policies
  - Lab policies and practices
  - Procedures for accessing the school network as a guest and for accessing Smart Boards and other technology
- Seating plan(s) for classes
- Creature comforts such as coffee and directions to the staff room and washrooms
- Needed keys and equipment

- Access to a knowledgeable contact person in the school who can answer questions and respond to emergencies.
- Advance notice if the assignment involves teaching physical education or partaking in outdoor activities (such as supervision)

### The Role of the Administrator

Substitute teachers appreciate being acknowledged and supported by the school administrator and notified when administrators are absent. As one participant noted, “Only some principals make it a habit to visit subs. Some I’ve never met, although I’ve spent five to ten days per year in the school.” Another teacher and former administrator had this observation:

*I believe the principal sets the tone for how a substitute is approached. ... Very rarely have I met a principal or vice-principal except by chance. I really believe administrators should make a point of knowing all subs. After all, they should be knowledgeable about who is in their school.*

A substitute teacher’s first point of contact in a new school is usually the general office. Therefore, when the administrator is unavailable, the important work of welcoming the teacher and providing needed orientation usually falls to office staff, some of whom are “not helpful, not welcoming, not prepared.” Some respondents encountered office staff whom they described as “rude,” “indifferent” or “too busy.”

### The School Climate

*Walking into a new beginning almost every day is a very difficult and challenging job.*

In answering the open-ended questions, respondents expressed considerable frustration with the unprofessional, unwelcoming and disrespectful behaviours that they sometimes encounter from their colleagues. Although some schools regard their substitute teachers as respected guests, many others treat them as workhorses that school staff are encouraged to use to maximum capacity throughout the day. As one teacher noted, “Guest teachers need to be careful about the schools they choose to work at. ... Schools vary in the extent to which they are open and welcoming. Together, administrators, staff and students set the tone.” When administrators and staff show little regard for a substitute teacher, students, in turn, will, as one respondent put it, “show you about the same amount of respect as does the staff—which is about zero.” Another teacher concluded, “It’s all a question of leadership or lack thereof.”

Generally speaking, disrespect in schools takes three forms: (1) failing to recognize the substitute teacher as a guest in the school, (2) failing to provide the substitute with needed breaks during the day and (3) assigning the substitute work that consistently fails to recognize his or her status as a colleague, as someone who is willing and able to teach.

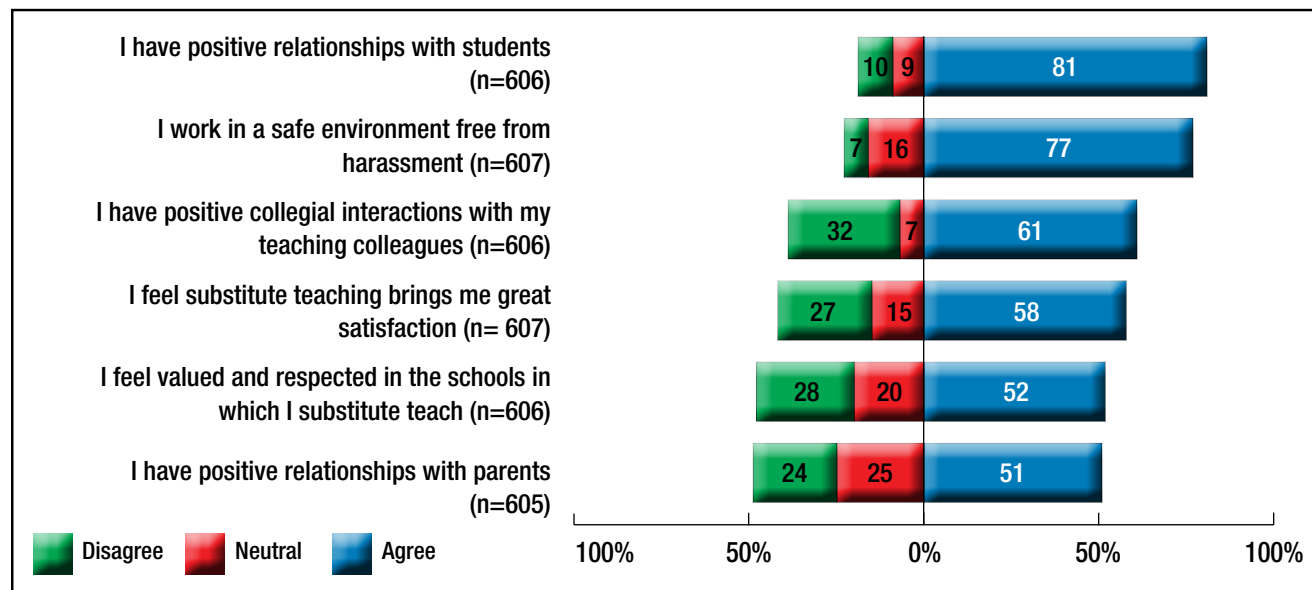


Figure 9: Substitute Teachers’ School Relationships

## 12 • Substitute Teachers in Alberta: A Research Report

Treating substitute teachers as guests involves explicitly recognizing and appreciating them for undertaking the unenviable task of making their way among strangers and of enduring constantly changing conditions of practice. Being isolated and marginalized by colleagues is hurtful: “In many schools,” one respondent observed, “I felt very isolated. The ‘regular’ teachers don’t talk to you.” Another respondent put it this way: “In some schools, I feel welcomed and valued by staff members. I’ve been in other schools where, at lunch or recess, no one has talked to me or acknowledged my presence.”

A particular flashpoint of discontent is the assignment of supervision duties. A substantial proportion (32 per cent) of respondents expressed dissatisfaction with this aspect of their conditions of practice. One member cited a memo from a school principal to the effect that “all substitute teachers will be put to work supervising even if supervision is not in the regular teacher’s timetable.” Another respondent noted that substitute teachers “are viewed negatively when they decline supervision duties that they are not legally required or able to do.”

Some teachers are asked to do morning supervision on their first day at a school, an assignment that robs them of the preparation time they need to “thoroughly go over the lesson plans, find the resources they need and locate the library, the gym or other classrooms to which the plans may request them to take the children.” Another respondent had this to say about morning supervision: “Despite the fact that my HR department says that before-

school supervision is not supposed to occur for guest teachers, it happens fairly regularly. Supervising obviously has an impact upon how prepared I am to teach my students because it cuts into before-school prep time significantly.” Still another respondent said that, unless the substitute is already familiar with the school, he or she is ill-equipped to deal with any incident that may arise during morning supervision.

Substitute teachers also regard as disrespectful the common practice of filling their preparation time with unanticipated class supervision or other assignments. Not only does doing so deprive them of the time they need to prepare for classes but it can also lead to awkward or difficult situations. One respondent, for example, reported that she was asked to supervise a computer lab in an unfamiliar school but was given no information about what websites were considered acceptable for students to view and no background on lab policies and procedures. Another respondent observed that noon-hour supervision can be problematic because “[substitute teachers] are usually not familiar with school procedures, ... the school floor plan, ... the students, ... the behavioural expectations and what to do in the case of problems.” Failing to give substitute teachers adequate orientation can undermine their authority.

Another source of perceived disrespect is the practice of filling substitute teachers’ preparation time with “busy work” or asking them to “babysit” classes rather than teach. As one respondent observed, “I do not feel valued when I am assigned photocopying for various members of staff rather than working with

### The Importance of Respect

- “I’ve had to ask kids where the room in which I’m teaching is because administrative staff have shoved a folder at me with nothing in it (not even a map of the school) and then proceeded to do other work or have other conversations.”
- “Many times I don’t mind [an] extra class, but I would really appreciate being asked first if I am willing to cover it.”
- “Despite the fact that my HR department says that guest teachers are not to be assigned before-school supervision, it happens fairly regularly. Such an assignment obviously affects how prepared I am to teach my students because it cuts into my before-school prep time significantly.”
- “Some schools use substitutes to fill in and give relief to teachers—all day. So you are running from one class to the next, not knowing where your next class will be.”
- “There are times when I supervise during all three recesses, and I have to teach every period, which leaves very little—or no—time for preparation, bathroom breaks or eating lunch.”

students in a classroom.” Another said, “It makes me feel like I am simply there to do the jobs the regular teachers do not want.”

In some cases, substitute teachers are assigned tasks that could be construed as violating professional teaching standards. One teacher, for example, was asked to grade student essays, an assignment for which she did not feel prepared: “I do not have the criteria that the teacher uses, and asking me to mark things such as essay questions seems unreasonable since I may not use the same criteria as the classroom teacher.” The best interests of students may be compromised when teachers are asked to perform work that they do not feel qualified to do or for which they have not been adequately prepared.

Some respondents stated that they complied with unreasonable requests because they were afraid that,

if they didn't, they would not be called back to the school. As one respondent noted, “If a substitute teacher on a prep is asked to cover for another teacher, the substitute is reluctant to decline for fear of leaving a bad impression and thus not getting called back in the future.” Another respondent had this observation: “As substitutes, we are often taken advantage of by the teachers we replace. We are often asked to do extra supervision and tasks, and we do them because we hope that the teachers will call us again so we, too, can make a living.” Because they are waiting for permanent positions, younger teachers are particularly afraid to decline unreasonable requests. As one veteran noted, “I will speak up for myself whereas a younger teacher won't.”



## Support from Districts

This survey evaluated four key areas of district-level support: benefits, pensions, access to substitute-teaching assignments and overall communication. Poor communication practices at the district level are not uncommon. Indeed, only 48 per cent of respondents were satisfied with their access to district e-mail. Poor communication at the district level can have several negative consequences, including (1) making it difficult for substitute teachers to apply for permanent positions, (2) rendering access to substitute teaching assignments unfair and inconsistent and (3) making it difficult for substitute teachers to access professional development opportunities.

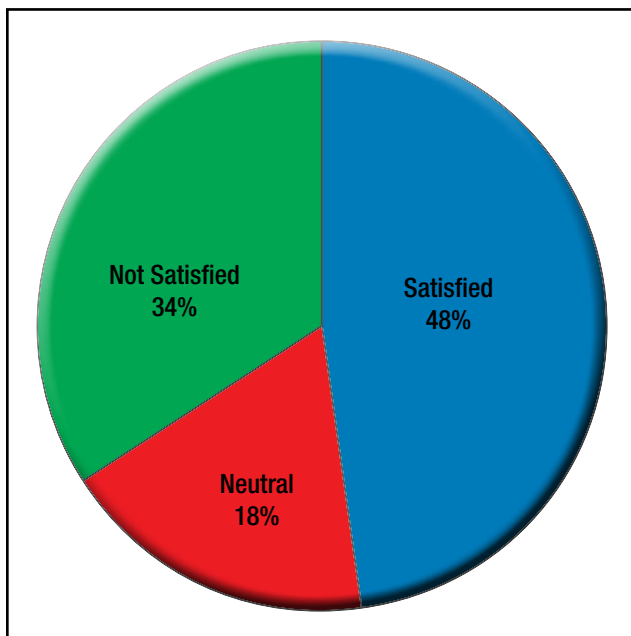


Figure 10: Access to District E-mail

Unsurprisingly, teachers with more experience tend to be more familiar with district policies and to be better at advocating for themselves. Teachers with significant experience are most likely to be recently retired and, as a result, to be thoroughly familiar with the district. As Table 1 shows, experienced teachers are more likely than their inexperienced colleagues to know whom to contact in the division office if they have questions about their role as a substitute teacher or their employment status.

### Call-Out Systems for Substitute Teaching Assignments

A number of teachers expressed frustration with the automated callout systems, whether telephone- or web-based, that many jurisdictions use to alert substitute teachers to potential assignments. In theory, a centralized, automated system is fair because it offers work on a first-come, first-served basis. However, some teachers feel constantly anxious about missing a call, particularly from an inflexible, automated system. Here’s how one respondent described the problem:

*To save on labour, certain divisions have an automated callout system. However, this system basically puts substitute teachers on call all evening and restricts the activities that they can do because they do not want to miss being called. Some divisions track how often you say no or do not answer and then call less frequently as a result.*

Web-based systems create similar problems in that they require teachers to be “chained” to their computers to watch for work. As one respondent put it, “My current school board offers jobs online.

KNOW WHOM TO CONTACT	YEARS OF TEACHING EXPERIENCE				
	1 year	2 to 4 years	5 to 9 years	10 to 19 years	20+ years
Yes	53%	63%	69%	65%	81%
No	47%	37%	31%	42%	19%

Table 1: Knowledge of District Contacts by Years of Teaching Experience

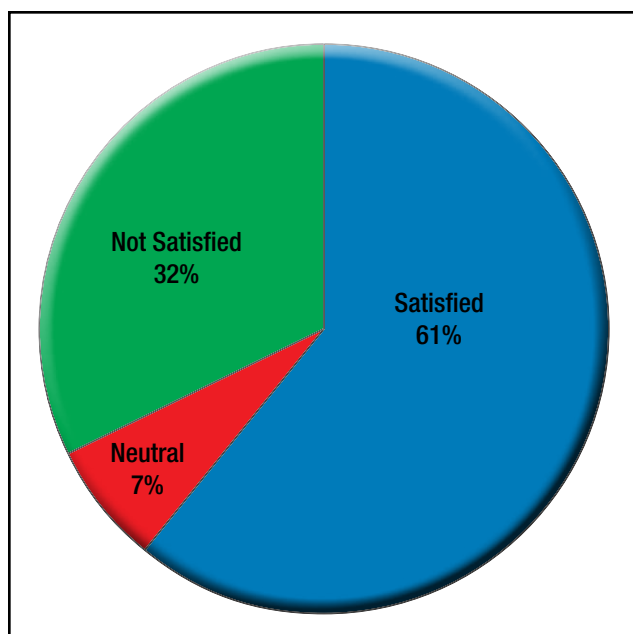


Figure 11: Satisfaction with Opportunities to Teach (N=608)

Unless you are online 24/7, it is almost impossible to find jobs.” Another respondent had this to say about how automated systems keep teachers preoccupied:

*The way it is currently set up encourages subs to be connected at all times. The work board is set up on a first-come, first-served basis. I believe that the substitute teacher’s primary commitment should be to the students in the classroom, not to concerns about whether he or she will be working tomorrow.*

Some respondents questioned whether centralized dispatch systems do, in fact, aggregate all substitute teaching assignments. Some teachers reported that they were receiving fewer assignments under automated systems and/or that they were confused about the extent to which assignments continued to be distributed on the basis of the personal relationships a teacher might develop at a school. One respondent noted that “the system has never called me nor have there been any jobs available

when I call the line. The only jobs I have received have occurred when I’ve called the help desk for sub placements.” In many cases, both a centralized system and an informal system of one-to-one relationships appear to be operating simultaneously.

An ad hoc and decentralized system of relationships (as opposed to the first-come, first-served logic of a centralized, automated system) has both benefits and drawbacks.<sup>1</sup> On the one hand, employing the same substitute teacher provides continuity for students and helps build collegial relationships between permanent and substitute teachers. Indeed, some early-career teachers intentionally set out to form relationships with individual teachers, administrators and schools in an effort to secure a permanent position. Here’s how one teacher described her reaction upon learning that the division had adopted an automated callout system:

*All of the hard work I did last year for teachers who did call me back repeatedly—those teachers can no longer call to book me. Job postings are now available only on a whoever-is-at-the-computer-first basis. This was supposedly done with young, new teachers in mind (of which I am one). However, it has only made it more difficult for me to get assignments.*

On the other hand, some substitute teachers may have difficulty breaking into substitute teaching if, as one respondent noted, the “system ... requires them to know people who will think to hire them.” For teachers who are just starting out, “establishing contacts can be a huge challenge that makes getting sufficient work almost impossible.”

Overall, lack of transparency and inconsistency in how substitute teaching assignments are offered create confusion and frustration. Attempts to streamline the process by using automated phone- or web-based systems appear to be hit-and-miss at best. Tensions continue to exist between centralized and local/individualized callout systems.

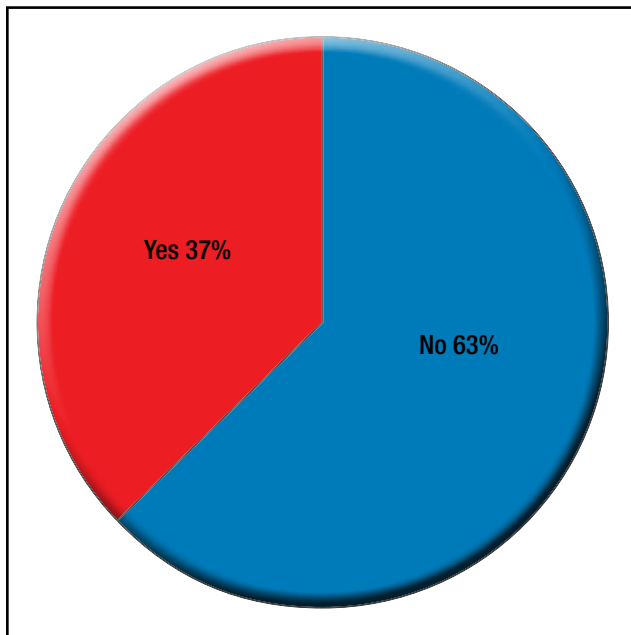
1. In 2003, the British Columbia Teachers’ Federation (BCTF) passed the following resolutions: (1) That the BCTF encourage locals, through mid-contract modifications, to secure contract language that provides for an objective teacher on call (TOC) callout procedure (49.19 a); and (2) that BCTF locals be encouraged to seek elimination of the practice of contract teachers calling out, selecting or expressing a preference for particular TOCs to fill a teacher absence (49.19 b). Available at <http://bctf.ca/TeachersOnCall.aspx?id=5024>.

## Half-Day Assignments

Half-day assignments pose a number of difficulties for substitute teachers, particularly for those who are under the gun to maximize their incomes. Given staggered school schedules and travel times, teachers may find themselves unable to work two half-day assignments on the same day. Here's how one respondent described the problem:

*Our school division will not even consider paying slightly more for half a day when it's impossible to go to two different schools, each with a different schedule. Still, the division complains about subs not accepting half days.*

Because substitute teachers are often unable to piece together a full day of employment if they accept a half-day assignment, they believe that boards should pay them more than 50 per cent of the full-day rate for accepting a half-day assignment. Respondents also noted that some school boards engage in such unfair cost-cutting practices as releasing substitutes at noon on early-dismissal days or releasing them just a few minutes short of the cut-off for a full day of sub pay.



**Figure 12: Have You Declined an Assignment for Which You Do Not Feel Qualified? (N=603)**

## Appropriate Assignments

*Of the few calls I receive, many are for placements that are outside of my expertise. I decline them because, as a professional, I feel that I need to have a strong background in the subject that I'm being asked to teach. I'm not sure why the placement system can't better match the placement to the substitute teacher.*

According to respondents, callout systems often fail to match assignments with teachers having the appropriate qualifications. Some respondents worry that declining an assignment will reduce their chances of securing future assignments. Here's how one retired high school teacher described her experience:

*I am called daily with numerous positions that are completely inappropriate, such as teaching Grade 2 or junior high physical education. I decline them as inappropriate but then usually receive a personal call asking that I take something. If I decline, I am chastised and worry that I may be removed from the substitute list.*

In some cases, boards fail to adequately inform teachers in advance of the grades or subject areas they will be teaching. In others, substitute teachers arrive at a school only to find that the assignment has changed from what they were promised.

## Hiring Practices

*When I was in university, I thought I would be getting a classroom when I was done. I'm not sure I would have racked up \$50,000 in student loans if I knew I would be stuck subbing. Sometimes I think about becoming an aide just to have a sense of permanency, inclusion and connection, to see the same kids every day, and to wake up knowing if and where I will work. I go on with the hope that I will have my own classroom one day. I miss long-term planning. I miss making bulletin boards. I miss being in the school until late getting everything ready for the next day.*

Previous studies have shown that new teachers and substitute teachers are frustrated by the lack of transparency and fairness in the hiring practices of some boards.<sup>2</sup> For the 48 per cent of respondents in

2. See B Arkison, J C Couture and L Servage (2010). *The Experience of Substitute Teaching in Alberta Schools*. Available at the Alberta Teachers' Association website at [www.teachers.ab.ca](http://www.teachers.ab.ca) under Publications, Research Updates.

this study who are substitute teaching in the hope that doing so will lead to a permanent contract, issues of lack of transparency and fairness continue to be a source of frustration and resentment. Many respondents believe that school boards engage in such unfair practices as these:

- Hiring out-of-province or less-experienced teachers to save money
- Failing to inform substitute teachers about job opportunities
- Making hiring decisions on the basis of whom a candidate knows
- Passing over older, experienced teachers in favour of younger teachers who have just completed their university training

Although substitute teachers do not expect special treatment, they believe that their substitute teaching experience in a district, along with positive evaluations by administrators, should put them in good stead for obtaining a permanent position. They are baffled when they are passed over in favour of new or out-of-province teachers who lack experience and have no track record in the district. As Figure 13 shows, many early-career teachers are

substitute teaching while waiting to obtain permanent positions. Veteran teachers, by contrast, tend to be less interested in full-time work than their younger colleagues. Veteran teachers, in other words, are more likely than novice teachers to be substitute teaching by choice rather than by necessity.

### Getting an Evaluation

Among study participants, 57 per cent stated that they had been evaluated for the purposes of obtaining permanent certification, and 43 per cent stated that they had been evaluated at some point for the purposes of a job referral. Unsurprisingly, teachers were more likely to have been evaluated as they gained teaching experience.

Some substitute teachers are unable to obtain needed evaluations from administrators:

*Principals I have talked to are “too busy” to provide any evaluation and refuse to be a reference for me on the grounds that they would have to observe me a lot to be able to make a judgment. Even if they had time, how could they assess my knowledge, skills and attributes for permanent certification if subbing doesn’t use all these skills?*

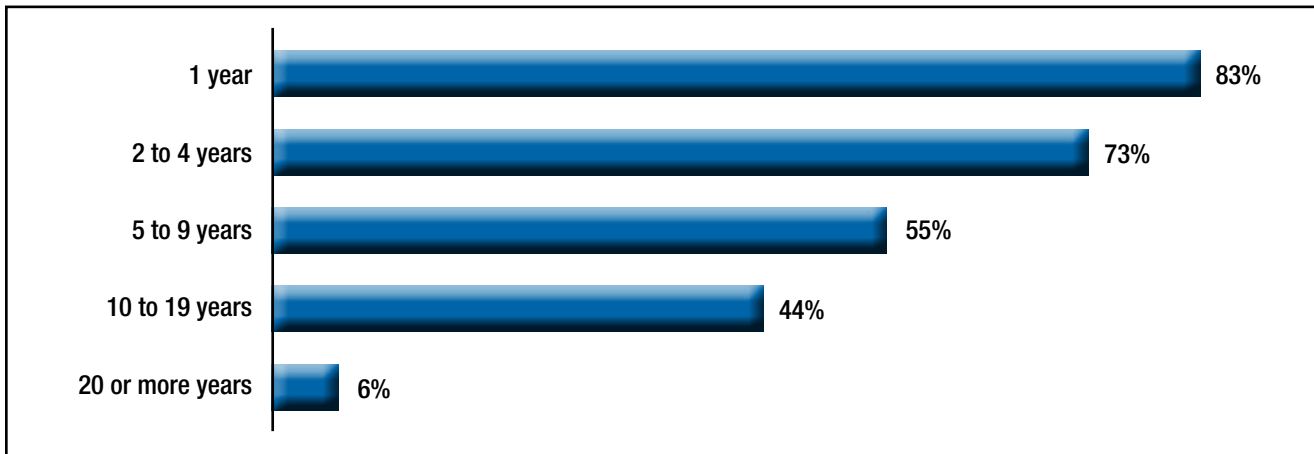
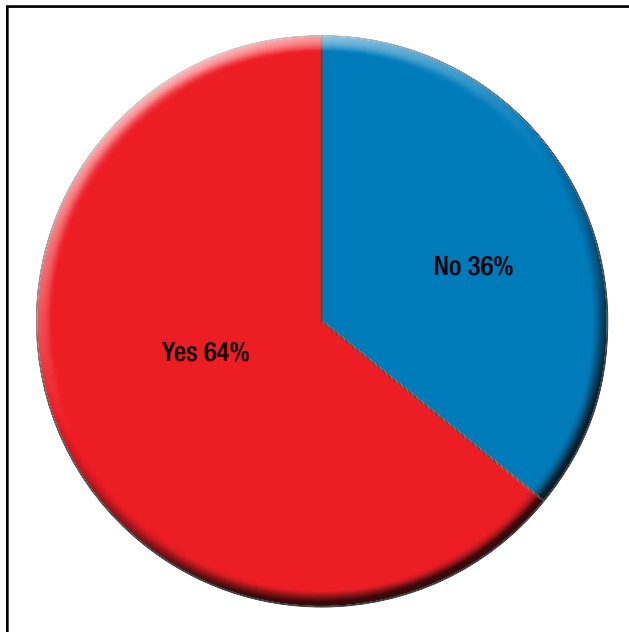


Figure 13: Substitute Teachers Seeking Full-Time Employment by Years of Teaching Experience



**Figure 14: Portion of Respondents Who Feel Comfortable Approaching Their Principal to Ask Questions, Raise Concerns or Request an Evaluation (N=605)**

Another respondent noted that even getting a meeting with an administrator is difficult in “schools that are so busy and overcrowded.” Another respondent mentioned that she was seeking a formal evaluation but was concerned that doing so could be “a burden to an already-overburdened administrator.”

### **Failure to Get a Permanent Position**

Respondents seeking permanent positions are frustrated not only by their inability to obtain a permanent position but also by their uncertainty as to why this is the case. If some substitute teachers need to improve professionally before being considered for a permanent position, it is, as one teacher stated, incumbent upon the district to provide constructive feedback and support:

*It is common knowledge (perhaps not correct) that there are subs who will never achieve full-time employment because they have deficits in their teaching or language or whatever. I feel it is almost cruel for the board and the ATA to continue not to provide an evaluation and then help those*

### **Hiring Practices**

- “Contracts are not posted for permanent or temporary contracts other than at the end of the school year. Often, substitute teachers are not given interviews for the jobs that are posted. Instead, many new grads get the jobs, while teachers who have been substituting for five or more years are not even interviewed. I have been on the substitute list since I graduated in 2006. I have had only two interviews in that time, even after talking to staff and principals. There needs to be some type of seniority system in place. There are dozens of qualified staff currently teaching in our schools who have the experience and knowledge for these permanent positions. Instead ‘new’ teachers are given the jobs solely because they are a cheaper hire. This is extremely frustrating and has led me to look for jobs outside of school districts.”
- “I am concerned that supply positions and probationary contracts are consistently being given to new teachers, teachers from out of the province or country or teachers from other boards instead of to qualified teachers who wish to be permanent and have been substituting for the board for several years. How do they justify this? Is there no reward for competence, professionalism and loyalty?”
- “I was specifically told by administrative staff and principals during an interview for a contract position that they wanted to give graduates a chance. In other words, as an older, single parent quite high up on the grid, I was being declined.”
- “As a substitute, I have had many compliments from teachers and students, so I do not know why I cannot get a job. I also think that principals have been dishonest with me in the past about why they do not hire me. I am a good teacher (with experience), and it is unfortunate that I was never given the opportunity to prove that in a full-time position.”



*subs upgrade their skillset to achieve a full-time position. To let them continue to hope for a job and never have the chance to be considered because no one is willing to take that very hard step to help is an avoidance of our professional duty.*

## Professional Development Opportunities

In general, respondents believe that substitute teachers continue to receive marginal professional development. Some respondents reported that they do not receive adequate information from the ATA or the district about professional development opportunities. One reason may be that, unlike full-time staff, many substitute teachers do not have access to district e-mail.

In some cases, professional development is offered but is not practical:

*The lack of professional development opportunities for substitute teachers is striking. Such opportunities are often not tailored to our needs or are not advertised in a way that would inform us of the opportunities available. This is especially disheartening for substitutes who are new teachers and are looking for full-time teaching positions. In this case, professional development is important but seemingly impossible for us. Furthermore, the costs associated with some of these opportunities are simply too high to be practical. Not only are we missing a day of work (for which we will not be paid) but we are required to pay the full amount for these opportunities, an amount that often cannot be subsidized or reimbursed.*

OPPORTUNITIES AVAILABLE	YEARS OF TEACHING EXPERIENCE				
	1 year	2 to 4 years	5 to 9 years	10 to 19 years	20+ years
Satisfied	63.4%	52.2%	48.7%	68.6%	70.7%
Neutral	5.6%	8.0%	6.4%	3.9%	7.6%
Dissatisfied	31.0%	39.8%	44.8%	27.5%	21.6%

**Table 2: Satisfaction with Opportunities to Substitute Teach by Years of Experience**

### Struggling to Get By

- “This is my second year out of university, and my subbing days have increased. But I find I am travelling over 60 km to access work. I do not see staying in a profession that has me living below the poverty line after my second year of teaching. I cannot afford it with two kids to support and university debt.”
- “I often get called with little notice and I drive 80 km one way to substitute teach because it is very difficult to get jobs close to home. I also had to pick up a part-time job because I do not get called enough!”
- “In the early years when I was teaching full time, my pension premiums were very low. Then for the remainder of my pensionable service, which included the majority of years, I contributed at a substitute-teaching rate—again, very low. Upon reaching the age of 55, I applied for a pension. The monthly payments are minimal but greatly appreciated.”
- “It is really hard for a substitute teacher to get a permanent teaching certificate even though he or she has been working more than 400 school days.”
- “The pay rate is too low for the amount of work that we are expected to do. With the amount of work available, I would make more money as a .5 teacher, get more time off and receive benefits.”

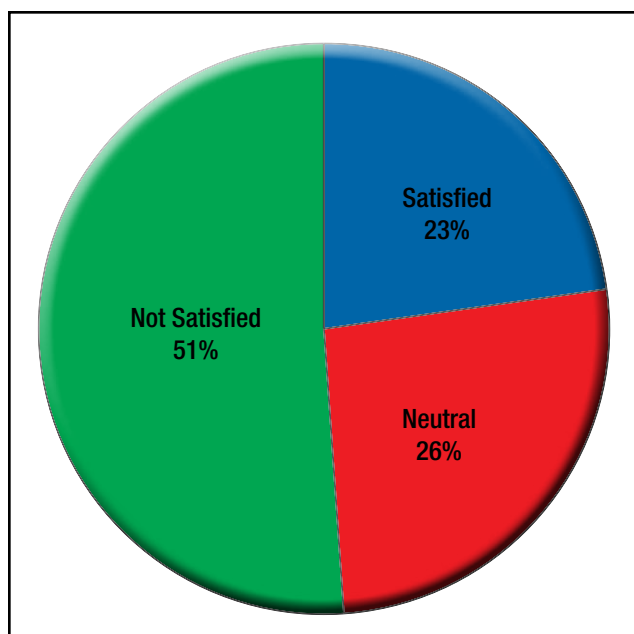


Figure 15: Portion of Respondents Satisfied with PD Opportunities

Few respondents identified specific professional development needs, although several mentioned the need for Smart Board training.

### Compensation

Overall, substitute teachers expressed dissatisfaction with most aspects of their

compensation. Many respondents mentioned the disparity between their compensation and that of full-time permanent teachers. Disparities in income, job security and benefits contribute to the feeling on the part of many substitute teachers that they are not respected and recognized for their work. Here’s how one respondent described the mutually reinforcing relationship between low compensation and low status:

*There is little that the ATA can do to change the perception and image of subs. However, subs have little status in the eyes of staff and students. This perception changes quickly once a substitute teacher acquires a permanent position. Conversely, a teacher who retires and subs occasionally tends to lose status. This decrease in status is related to the pay that subs receive and the things that they are asked to do, often by staff with whom they once worked as colleagues. It may be true that the status they have starts with the pay they receive. Subs would like to feel that they are a part of the staff team but are more often treated as temporary workers.*

### Grid Pay

Respondents were asked about existing grid pay schemes and the grid pay schemes that they believed should be in place. Their responses are summarized in Figure 16.

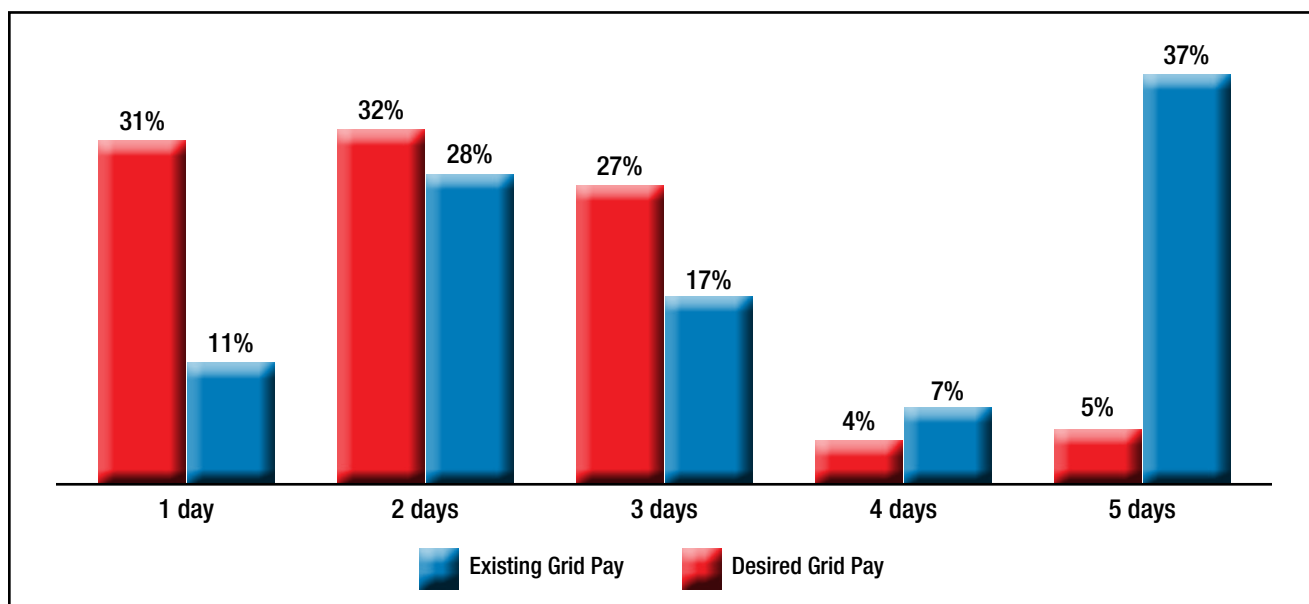


Figure 16: Existing vs Desired Grid Pay



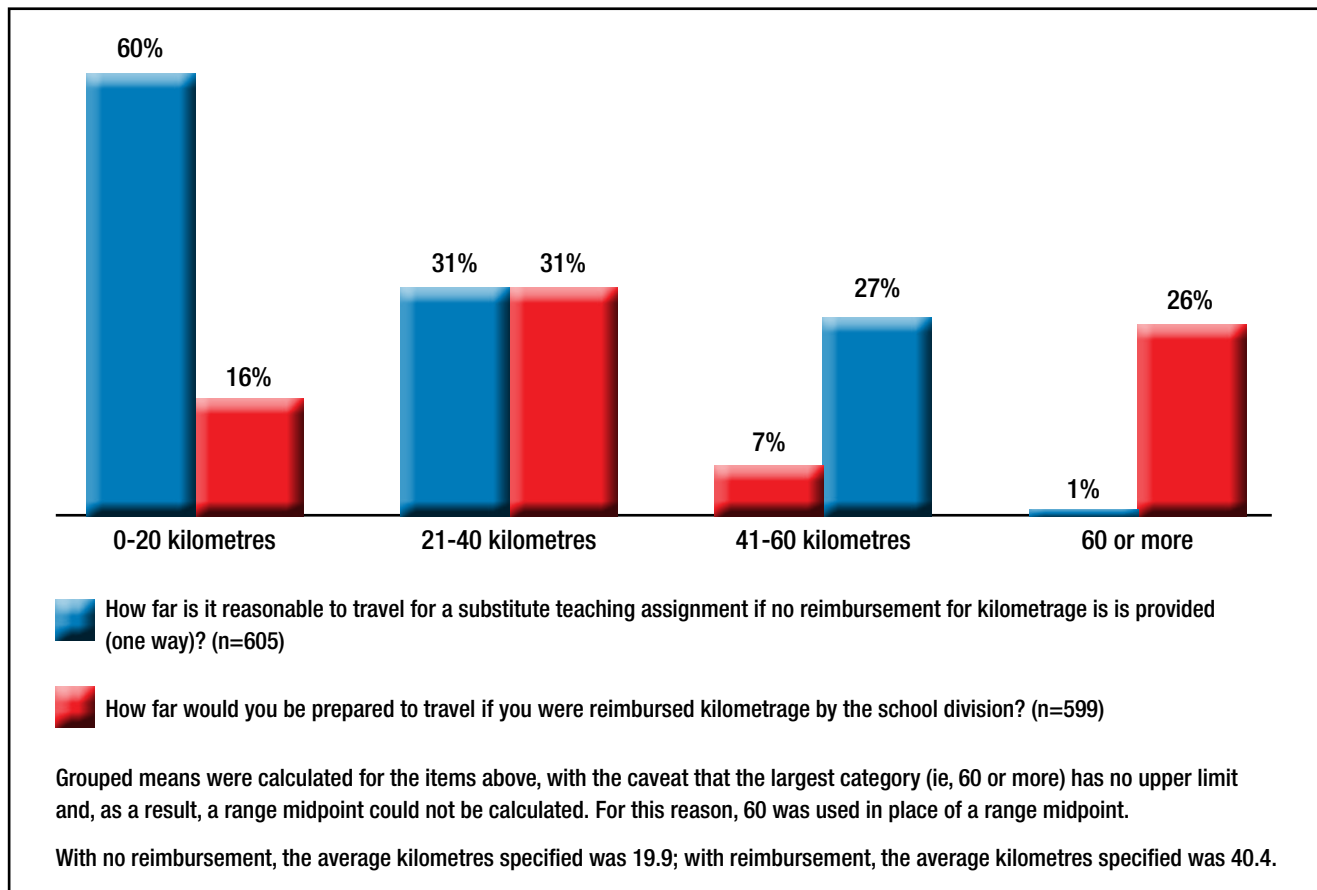
On average, teachers believe that grid pay should be granted after 2.2 days of substitute teaching. In practice, teachers need to work an average of 3.3 days before they receive grid pay. The data also suggests that the compensation afforded to substitute teachers varies significantly from one district to another. Substitutes argue that they should receive grid pay sooner rather than later because, after a day or two in one teaching assignment, they must assume greater responsibility:

*I've taught a couple of full weeks and accepted a few three-day assignments. Those assignments require me to call upon my experience, background and training to revise lesson plans and so on based on what we accomplished. Both times that I was brought in for a week I did nearly as much planning as I would have if I had been teaching full time (the teachers trusted me). It's frustrating that I don't get paid for that.*

Although substitute teachers believe that they should receive grid pay earlier, the implementation of

shorter waiting times appears to encourage schools to manipulate substitute teaching assignments to save money. One respondent suggested that “substitute teachers should be put on the pay grid if they teach at the same school for one or more days in a row even if they sub for different teachers.” Another stated, “I find it frustrating that schools call different subs in for multiple-day absences, thereby ensuring that one sub is not eligible to be paid grid pay.” One respondent had the following recommendations:

*Every effort should be made to keep the same substitute in the position when a teacher is absent for several consecutive days. This is good not only for the substitute but also for the students. Substitute pay should be centralized rather than paid by each school. Centralization helps to alleviate such problems as using internal coverage rather than calling a substitute, alternating substitutes so as not to have to grid pay and dismissing a substitute early so as not to pay for a full day.*



**Figure 17: Willingness to Travel—With and Without Reimbursement**

### Sufficient Work

For many substitute teachers, substitute teaching is a primary source of income. Therefore, it is not surprising that a number of respondents expressed concern that they were not obtaining enough work to survive financially. Here's how one respondent described the issue: "My biggest concern is the lack of work as a substitute teacher. I have averaged one-half day over the last four weeks and was told that this is because there is not enough work and there are too many teachers on the list." Another said, "I could never make a living as a sub, and I work three different jurisdictions!"

Willingness to travel long distances and to piece together half-day assignments is further evidence that, at least in some jurisdictions, not enough work is available to enable substitute teachers to earn a living.

### Travel

Many substitute teachers end up travelling long distances to obtain enough work. Although substitute teachers are willing to compromise on travel costs, the tipping point appears to be about 40 km, beyond which teachers' willingness to drive without receiving some form of travel reimbursement drops sharply. Naturally, the issue of compensation for travel is biggest in rural areas.

The issue of travel, along with such other factors as whether compensation will be on the grid and whether the assignment is for a half or a full day, combine to create a situation such that the teachers least in need of work are able to pick and choose the assignments that they will accept. More experienced teachers, for example, are less willing to travel

long distances without compensation than are their younger colleagues.

With no reimbursement, the average kilometers specified was 19.9 km; with reimbursement, the average kilometers specified was 40.4 km.

### Benefits

*I work at least 150 days a year and would love to have the option of paying into the health benefits program. I love my job as a guest teacher and would consider it an absolutely ideal full-time job if only I had benefits. Please consider this when renegotiating our next contract.*

Respondents raised two overall concerns about benefits. First, many respondents pointed out that their benefit plans are substandard compared with those available to teachers with permanent contracts. Respondents noted, for example, that the coverage they received was inferior and/or that the plans were too expensive. One teacher, who was required to enrol in Blue Cross, stated, "I resent having to pay for benefits [when] I don't receive enough assignments to cover the cost of the benefit plan." Another respondent put it this way:

*I have access to benefits, but the cost compared with my income is a complete mismatch! Additionally, I am excluded from some benefits that employed teachers receive even though the premiums I pay are much, much, much higher.*

Second, many respondents pointed out that the cost of benefits available to them is excessive, especially given their insecure incomes. The problem is exacerbated when teachers are required to enrol in a benefit plan. Some respondents suggested that substitute teachers should be given a choice about

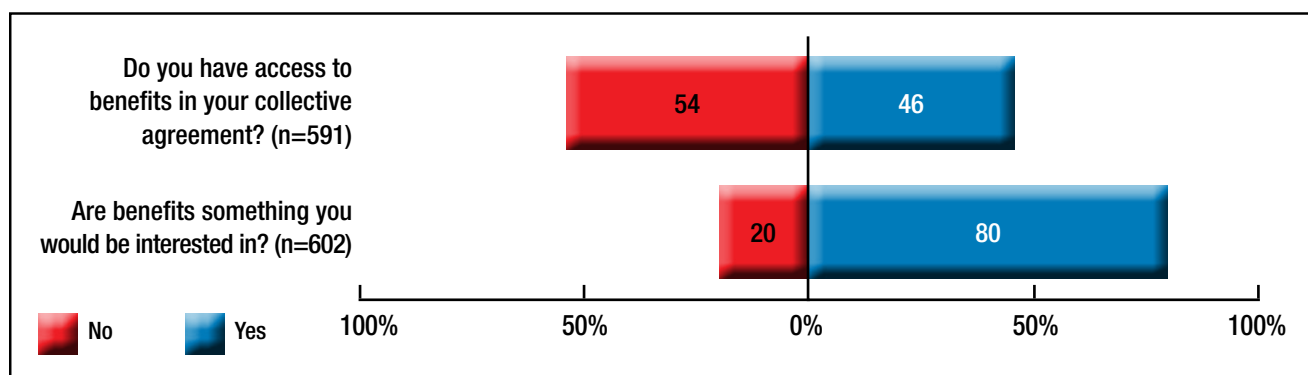


Figure 18: Benefits Received vs Benefits Desired

whether or not they want to participate in benefit plans:

*An opt-out-if-otherwise-covered clause is common in other venues and avoids redundancy. Similarly, if subs wants coverage, they should be able to choose from a full suite of services, not a scaled-back plan compared with what is available to contract teachers.*

The data also suggest that districts vary widely in the benefits they provide and the conditions associated with those benefits.

### Pensions

Whereas early-career teachers are preoccupied with obtaining permanent positions, mid-career and retired teachers tend to be more concerned about pensions. Substitute teachers' day-to-day work does not constitute pensionable service. Instead, substitutes are able to purchase pensionable service in one-year blocks only.

One teacher stated, "I would like more general information on purchasing pensionable time from sub teaching. I started teaching late—at age 37—so I will never be eligible for a full pension."

Another retired teacher raised concerns about the number of days that retired teachers are allowed to teach: "Why am I allowed to work only 0.6 of a school year before my pension is clawed back?"

### Tensions Between Early-Career and Retired Teachers

The 2008 report on substitute teachers concluded that substitute teachers typically fall into three broad groups:

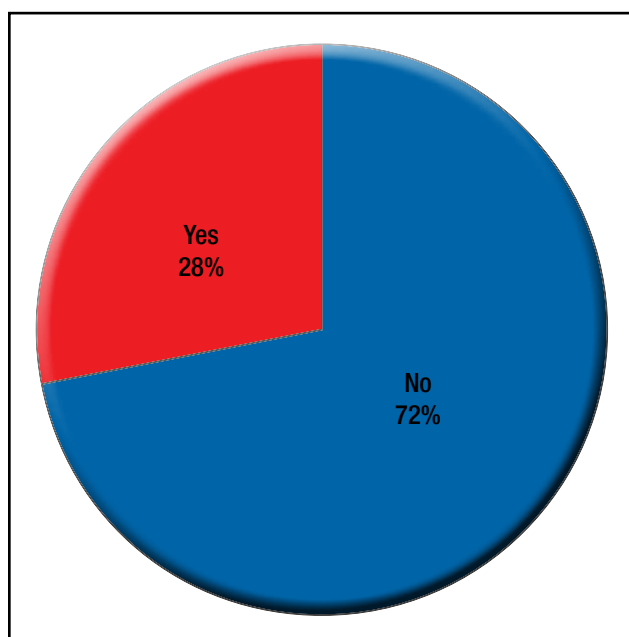
1. Early-career teachers who are seeking full-time, permanent work
2. Career substitute teachers who are not seeking permanent employment
3. Retired teachers who continue to work in their districts as substitute teachers

A number of respondents observed that tensions often arise between retired teachers and early-

career teachers because each group is competing for essentially the same substitute teaching assignments. The tension between these two groups was the subject of considerable comment in this survey, likely because nearly half of the respondents were from the Calgary convention area where, in 2010, the Calgary Board of Education decided to remove retired teachers from its substitute teaching roster.<sup>3</sup>

Some early-career teachers resent the fact that retired teachers continue to teach as substitutes. One respondent observed that "retired teachers ... get a lot of the multiple-day teaching assignments and contracts because of their connections ... despite the fact that, being at the top of the pay scale, they cost more." Another respondent put it this way:

*I am very strongly against retired teachers being able to substitute teach ... unless, as in small communities, there is no one else available. Hiring retired teachers disadvantages younger teachers who are struggling to get experience and a position, and it takes away from those making subbing a career.*



**Figure 19: Portion of Respondents Currently Receiving an Alberta Teachers' Retirement Fund Pension (n=607)**

3. In 2010, 49 per cent of survey respondents were from the Calgary convention area compared with only 18 per cent in the ATA's 2008 survey of substitute teachers.

## 24 • Substitute Teachers in Alberta: A Research Report

Many respondents believe that retired teachers are financially secure and are using their income from substitute teaching to pay for extras. However, not all retired teachers are well-off. As one retired teacher explained, “[My] ATRF pension is very small and therefore I still need to work as long as I can to supplement my monthly income.” Another retired teacher stated, “I have given 27 full-time years to the system, and my pension is only enough to pay the bills. I need to substitute teach as much as anyone else.”

Other retired teachers emphasized the advantages they bring to the schools they serve. One teacher who had been laid off stated, “Many teachers and principals for whom I worked were very disappointed and upset because they value the classroom management skills of retired teachers.” These retired teachers were aware that younger teachers are seeking work but were not necessarily persuaded that they ought to step aside:

*I realize that I am taking work away from younger teachers who are trying to earn a living and work*

*their way into a permanent contract. Because of my age, I am not going to stay in the sub pool forever and I am not in the market for a full-time job.*

Another respondent reasoned this way:

*If I had worked in a division that refused to hire retired teachers as substitutes, I would simply have worked at least one more year and possibly two. Instead ... I retired earlier and opened up a job for someone else. All I wanted in return was a chance to supplement my income by substitute teaching four or five days a month.*

One retired teacher regarded being cut as a form of age discrimination. Another, from a different district, described the tension that exists between younger and more senior substitutes:

*I find ATA meetings to be very intimidating. Young substitute teachers verbally attack senior substitute teachers, insinuating that they should retire and make room for more assignments for younger teachers. As a result, I no longer attend ATA meetings.*

## Support from the Alberta Teachers' Association

Some respondents expressed dissatisfaction with the level of support and advocacy that the ATA provides to substitute teachers. One respondent stated that “conditions of practice for substitute teachers are deteriorating, and the ATA is doing very little to fight for the rights of substitute teachers.” Another respondent had this to say about the ATA:

*The ATA needs to do a lot more for substitute teachers, starting with evaluation of boards' hiring processes. [I] am concerned about lack of respect by some fellow teachers, by some teacher aides and by some secretaries. Many do not seem to feel that we are “real” teachers. The ATA itself seems unclear about this and does not provide us with the benefits all teachers get in phrasing of the collective agreements. ... It might help morale a lot not only to remind others that we are teachers but also to stand by us in collective bargaining and to argue for us to get grid pay and benefits prorated for days we teach. Otherwise we are only teachers in theory and are paid like babysitters.*

Respondents also mentioned that the ATA could do a better job of communicating with substitute teachers. Only 47 per cent expressed satisfaction with the ATA's service in providing them with publications such as the *ATA Magazine*. One reason for the relatively high level of dissatisfaction may be that substitute teachers often do not have access to a regular school mailbox. Indeed, 33 per cent of respondents expressed dissatisfaction with their access to mail. One respondent stated, “It would be nice to receive the *ATA Magazine* at my home by post. There are many months in which I never see a copy of the magazine.” Another respondent said, “I pay ATA dues and would like to have the magazine mailed to me.” This teacher went on to point out that the *ATA Magazine* is a way for the ATA not only to keep substitute teachers informed but also to demonstrate its recognition of and commitment to substitute teachers:

*The profession needs to increase its respect for its own backup system. One way to ensure that*

### On the Need for ATA Support

- “[I have] a great board that contacts all substitute teachers. The ATA substitute-teacher representative sends out constant e-mails. None of the other boards I am on do that.”
- “The only reason I have access to the *ATA News* and information about my ATA local is that I am involved at the local level and access ATA information online. I am the professional replacement representative for our local and am finding it frustrating communicating with other substitutes. It would be so much simpler if we had access to local e-mail. We are employees of the division, but we are the only employees without e-mail access.”
- “The ATA does nothing for sub teachers. There needs to be a fair way to call the teachers in! Retired teachers should be the last on the list to train new teachers. There are unfair hiring practices in [my] school division, which decides the placement of a position before the position is even posted. All eligible candidates are not being interviewed. Substitute teachers can't complain about this because they will never get a job.”
- “I would like to see the Association support its substitute teachers by encouraging school divisions to implement standards and policies regarding substitute teacher expectations in their schools.”

*happens is to make sure that all substitutes are known and networked so that they always receive ATA messages. Since substitute teachers often do not receive the ATA News and the ATA Magazine and since school boards seldom provide substitutes with access to e-mail, we need another system. The associations to which doctors and lawyers belong contact their members at their home addresses*

*and by e-mail, particularly if the members are not assigned to a specific location. The ATA could start to show substitutes respect by ensuring that they are included.*

Asked about the information and support they receive from their ATA locals, only 51 per cent of respondents were satisfied, 21 per cent were neutral and 28 per cent were dissatisfied.



# Analysis and Conclusion

Both this study, undertaken in the fall of 2010, and the survey that the Association administered in 2008 suggest that substitute teachers face difficult conditions of practice and limited prospects. The difficulties are particularly acute in the case of early-career teachers, who are more likely than veteran teachers to need their substitute-teaching income to survive and are often substitute teaching as they look for permanent, full-time positions. Broadly speaking, substitute teachers in Alberta face four major challenges:

1. Labour oversupply and mismatch
2. Weak protection under collective bargaining agreements
3. Poor communication practices at multiple levels
4. Lack of strong leadership

Although collective bargaining may ameliorate some of these concerns, conditions of practice for substitute teachers are unlikely to be improved without a conscious effort on the part of both jurisdictions and individual schools. Some of the barriers—such as the need for a callout system to ensure that substitute teaching assignments are distributed fairly and efficiently—are technical. Other barriers are cultural. As some respondents noted, leadership at both the school and jurisdictional levels sets the bar for how a jurisdiction's most vulnerable workers are treated.

## Labour Oversupply and Mismatch

In some areas of Alberta, there are more substitute teachers than there are assignments to be filled. Furthermore, the substitute teachers available in a particular region may not necessarily have the qualifications to take on the assignments that become available. Moreover, new teachers and substitute teachers are consistently confronted with opaque hiring practices and have little influence over the politics that tend to drive hiring in some districts and schools.

## Supply and Demand

Several recent studies have drawn attention to a mismatch between the skills that teachers have and the types of teaching positions available.<sup>4</sup> It is worth noting that school jurisdictions do not accrue any significant cost in maintaining a large pool of substitute teachers. Maintaining a large labour pool provides the jurisdiction with more flexibility and increases the likelihood that teachers will be available when someone having a certain area of specialization is needed. Jurisdictions and schools may also benefit when substitute teachers are forced to vie for substitute assignments and permanent positions. Whenever a large labour pool is competing for relatively few positions, ethical and professional concerns are bound to arise because the conditions that advantage the jurisdiction are likely to disadvantage the potential workers. Because substitute teachers are not protected by tenure, they are extremely vulnerable to the dynamics of labour supply and demand.

## Callout Systems and Distribution of Substitute Teaching Assignments

The survey suggests that some jurisdictions may have two callout systems in place at the same time to hire substitutes: one at the school level and a second at the district level. Not surprisingly, the simultaneous use of two systems can lead to tensions. In theory, a centralized system at the district level is fairer because it offers assignments on a first-come, first-served basis. Yet, many respondents observed that automated systems, whether telephone- or web-based, can create stress because they compel teachers to race to secure an assignment before someone else accepts it. Such systems also create confusion because some assignments are inexplicably filled without having been advertised on the callout.

Making technical improvements to the dispatch systems will not eliminate the second issue, which is really a matter of micropolitics. In other words, teachers and administrators will continue to give

4. See Kitchenham and Chasteauneuf (2010), who note that Alberta, British Columbia and Ontario have all reported not only mismatches between the skill sets of substitute teachers in particular regions and the teaching assignments available but also the tendency for there to be too few teachers in rural and northern areas and too many teachers in urban areas. See also Alberta Education (2010) and Clark and Antonelli (2009).



preference to substitute teachers with whom they have forged relationships and whom they regard as a good fit. Decentralized systems that enable teachers and administrators to call preferred subs can shut out other qualified substitute teachers. At the same time, such systems help eliminate the situation in which a substitute teacher, constantly faced with new assignments, becomes overwhelmed by feelings of isolation and loneliness. It is particularly important for rural and isolated schools to be able to call upon a reliable, locally available substitute teacher. In many cases, this person may be a retired teacher who continues to live close to his or her former school. The alternative—calling in a substitute teacher who lives far away from the school—may strike all parties as unfeasible or inefficient.

### **Hiring Substitute Teachers for Permanent Positions**

Many of the tensions between site-based authorities and district authorities that affect the equitable allotment of substitute teaching assignments appear to affect the hiring of teachers to permanent positions. Given the large number of substitute teachers who are gaining experience while waiting for permanent positions, the formal mechanisms and the informal political processes related to new hires warrant scrutiny. The frustration of early-career teachers who are unable to obtain a permanent position is palpable. Their frustration is exacerbated when positions are not advertised and/or when hiring practices and criteria are not transparent.

### **Collective Bargaining Issues**

The five-year collective agreements that teachers signed in 2007 are set to expire in August 2012. As a result, bargaining units will once again be negotiating on behalf of their members. Comments from respondents suggest that at least some substitute teachers do not feel that their interests are being well-represented by the Association. Substitute teachers have ongoing concerns about the following issues:

- Compensation for travel
- Protection from such unfair practices as being paid for half a day when the school day ends early, having to take on morning supervision, being assigned extra supervision, and working without breaks or preparation time
- Fewer benefits

- Disparities among districts with respect to the number of days that substitutes must teach before being placed on the grid
- Lack of opportunities to be evaluated for the purposes of permanent certification and/or obtaining a permanent position
- Lack of professional development opportunities.

Respondents made very few references (either positive or negative) to the activities of ATA locals or school representatives—an indication, perhaps, that ATA leadership at the local level is lacking when it comes to dealing with substitute teachers. Compared with permanent teachers, substitute teachers are small in number and weakly protected. They are unlikely to secure better conditions of practice without the support of their tenured colleagues. Such alliances must be forged by ATA locals.

Some respondents believe that their school board operates on the assumption that it can save money by hiring fewer regular teachers. However, schools with high student–teacher ratios have less flexibility when it comes to dealing with staff absences. Looked at from a human resources perspective, relying on substitute teachers to cover these absences may not be the most efficient way of deploying staff.

### **Leadership**

The most significant factor affecting the welfare of substitute teachers is undoubtedly leadership at the district level. District leaders set the tone and the standard for how school administrators treat substitute teachers. Administrators, in turn, set the tone for how permanent staff behave toward substitutes.

Responses to this survey and the one conducted in 2008 suggest that the material circumstances in which substitute teachers find themselves—whether having to drive from one assignment to the next over the lunch hour or being reduced to searching out keys to a classroom—speak volumes about how much a district or a school values its substitute teachers. Furthermore, the explicit policies that school districts adopt with respect to the conditions of practice of substitute teachers have cultural components. For example, when a school administrator allows a substitute teacher to be shuffled around the school all day as a floater, the school’s regular staff are likely to follow suit by treating the substitute teacher as an expendable commodity rather than a valued colleague.

## Communications

The way in which an organization communicates with substitute teachers is another indicator of the extent to which that organization values substitutes. This study suggests that school districts, individual schools, ATA locals and the provincial ATA can all do a better job of communicating with substitute teachers.

### District Communications

School districts can improve their communications with substitute teachers by taking the following measures:

- Be transparent in their hiring practices and in the way that they allocate substitute teaching assignments.
- Improve their dispatch systems based on feedback from substitute teachers.
- Assign district e-mail addresses to all substitute teachers.
- Alert substitute teachers to professional development opportunities on a regular basis.
- Ensure that substitute teachers are aware of the policies and procedures that affect them.
- Formally recognize substitute teachers for their contributions.

### School Communications

To ensure that substitute teachers feel welcome, school administrators should take the following steps:

- Establish a direct line of communication with substitute teachers.

- Establish and enforce a protocol for orienting substitute teachers to the school.
- Produce orientation binders containing school rules, safety procedures and other essential information.
- Explain to substitute teachers before they are hired exactly what is expected of them and what their duties will be.
- Establish and communicate to staff and students guidelines with respect to how substitute teachers are to be treated.

### Alberta Teachers' Association Communications

The ATA could improve its relationship with substitute teachers by taking the following measures:

- Organize outreach and professional development activities at the local level for substitute teachers.
- Provide opportunities for substitute teachers to forge relationships with their colleagues in different settings.
- Ensure that substitute teachers are aware of local opportunities and events.
- Ensure that substitute teachers receive support at the provincial level when they experience difficulties at the district or school level.
- Mail the *ATA Magazine*, the *ATA News* and other regular publications directly to substitute teachers' homes rather than to the school.
- Support bargaining units in securing better conditions of practice for substitute teachers.

## References

- Alberta Education. 2010. *Education Sector Workforce Planning: Framework for Action*. Edmonton, Alta: Alberta Education. Also available at <http://education.alberta.ca/admin/workforce.aspx> (accessed October 21, 2010).
- Arkison, B, J-C Couture and L Servage. 2010. *The Experience of Substitute Teaching in Alberta Schools*. Edmonton, Alta: Alberta Teachers' Association.
- Canadian Council on Learning. 2008. "The Replacements—Non-Permanent Teachers." *Lessons in Learning* (November 13).
- Clark, B R, and F Antonelli. 2009. *Why Teachers Leave: Results of an Ontario Survey 2006–08*. Toronto: Ontario Teachers' Federation and Government of Ontario. Also available at [www.otffeo.on.ca/english/media\\_briefs.php](http://www.otffeo.on.ca/english/media_briefs.php) (accessed November 3, 2010).
- Duggleby, P, and S Badali. 2007. "Expectations and Experiences of Substitute Teachers." *Alberta Journal of Educational Research* 53, no 1: 22–33.
- Kitchenham, A, and C Chasteauneuf. 2010. "Teacher Supply and Demand: Issues in Northern Canada." *Canadian Journal of Education* 33, no 4: 869–97.
- White, M. 2008. *Teachers Teaching on Call Working Conditions Survey: Summary of the Preliminary Findings*. Vancouver, BC: British Columbia Teachers' Federation. Also available at [http://bctf.ca/uploadedFiles/Publications/Research\\_reports/2008WLC02.pdf](http://bctf.ca/uploadedFiles/Publications/Research_reports/2008WLC02.pdf) (accessed May 4, 2010).
- Young, B, and M Brooks. 2004. "Part-Time Politics: The Micropolitical World of Part-Time Teaching." *Educational Management Administration Leadership* 32, no 2: 129–48.

# Appendix A: The Survey Instrument

The Association is interested in your opinions regarding your current experiences as a substitute teacher. Your responses to this survey will assist the Association in determining how to most effectively meet the needs of members like you. Please take the time to complete this survey carefully by responding to the questions below. *All responses will be kept confidential.*

## A. Current Teaching and Learning Conditions

- Following are several key elements relating to your conditions of practice as a substitute teacher. Use the scale below to indicate your degree of satisfaction with each element listed.

What is your level of satisfaction with ...

### General Teaching and Working Conditions

	Very satisfied	Somewhat satisfied	Neutral	Somewhat dissatisfied	Very dissatisfied
a. Opportunities to work (whether you receive enough opportunities to substitute teach).	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
b. Your overall workload and expectations for substitute teaching.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
c. The provision of lesson plans left for you.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
d. Amount of preparation time you receive.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
e. Orientation to the school(s) in which you substitute teach.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
f. Requirements to do extra supervision beyond the regular assignment of the teacher for whom you are substituting.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
g. Access to computer technology in the schools.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
h. Access to school keys.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
i. Access to professional development.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

### Availability of Information

	Very satisfied	Somewhat satisfied	Neutral	Somewhat dissatisfied	Very dissatisfied
j. Access to the school district e-mail.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
k. Access to a mailbox in the school.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
l. Access to school and/or district handbooks that provide procedures, class lists, student information and lockdown procedures.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

- m. Access to the *ATA News* and the *ATA Magazine* or other provincial ATA materials.
- n. Access to information from your ATA local.

### B. Your Individual Views on Improvements for Substitute Teaching

The following questions assess your opinion regarding specific ways that the substitute teaching experience might be improved.

2a. How many days do you have to substitute teach before you are placed on your appropriate grid pay level?

- 1 day  
 2 days  
 3 days  
 4 days  
 5 days

2b. After how many days do you believe you should receive grid-level pay?

- 1 day  
 2 days  
 3 days  
 4 days  
 5 days

3a. Do you have access to benefits in your collective agreement?

- Yes  
 No

3b. Are benefits something you would be interested in?

- Yes  
 No

4. How far (one way) is it reasonable to travel for a substitute teaching assignment if no reimbursement for kilometrage is provided?

- 0–20 kilometres  
 21–40 kilometres  
 41–60 kilometres  
 More than 60 kilometres

4a. How far (one way) would you be prepared to travel if you were reimbursed kilometrage by the school division?

- 0–20 kilometres  
 21–40 kilometres  
 41–60 kilometres  
 More than 60 kilometres

5. Are you currently looking for a full-time teaching job?

- Yes  
 No

6. Are you aware of other substitute teachers being hired by the board for full-time contracts or part-time contracts?

- Yes
- No

7a. Have you been evaluated, during your teaching career, for the purpose of achieving permanent certification?

- Yes
- No

7b. Have you been evaluated, during your teaching career, for the purpose of a job reference?

- Yes
- No

8. Do you have to decline assignments because you are being called to teach in areas for which you are not qualified?

- Yes
- No

9. Are you currently receiving an Alberta Teachers' Retirement Fund pension?

- Yes
- No

10. If you have questions about your role as a substitute teacher or your employment status, do you know whom to contact in the school division office to discuss your concerns?

- Yes
- No

11. Do you feel able to approach a school principal to ask questions, raise concerns or request an evaluation for employment purposes?

- Yes
- No

12. Provide additional comments on any of the topics above or summarize any issues and concerns you have regarding substitute teaching that would be worth consideration and advocacy by the Association.



### C. Your Overall Satisfaction with Substitute Teaching

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

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
a. I feel substitute teaching brings me great satisfaction.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
b. I have positive collegial interactions with my teaching colleagues.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
c. I work in a safe environment free from harassment.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
d. I have positive relationships with students.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
e. I have positive relationships with parents.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
f. I feel valued and respected in the schools in which I substitute teach.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

### D. Demographic Data

The following information will not identify you. Check only one response to each of the following statements:

14. Teachers' convention you are eligible to attend:

- Mighty Peace
- Northeast
- North Central
- Greater Edmonton
- Central East
- Central Alberta
- Palliser
- Calgary City
- South West
- Southeast

15. Your years of teaching experience, including the current year:

- 1 year
- 2–4 years
- 5–9 years
- 10–14 years
- 15–19 years
- 20–30 years
- Over 30 years

16. Your years of *substitute* teaching experience, including the current year:

- 1 year
- 2–4 years
- 5–9 years
- 10–14 years
- 15–19 years
- 20–30 years
- Over 30 years

17. Your current substitute teaching assignments are mainly related to students in

- ECS/kindergarten
- Grades 1–6
- Grades 7–9
- Grades 10–12
- Combinations
- All grades

If you chose Combinations, please specify:

18. Your age:

- 25 and younger
- 26–30
- 31–35
- 36–40
- 41–45
- 46–50
- 51–55
- 56–60
- 61–65
- Over 65

19. Your gender:

- Male
- Female







*This publication is part of an ongoing series of research updates published by the Alberta Teachers' Association. Further background information about the research studies cited in this publication is available from J-C Couture at the Alberta Teachers' Association, 11010 142 Street, Edmonton, AB T5N 2R1; phone 780-447-9400 (in Edmonton) or 1-800-232-7208 (toll free in Alberta); e-mail [jc.couture@ata.ab.ca](mailto:jc.couture@ata.ab.ca).*