

Schools:

Substitutes head hundreds of classrooms

School Board member says parents should be notified when teachers are long-term fill-ins



Steve Marcus

Theo Thrower is a substitute science teacher. He says the course work isn't all that different from the days when he was in science class.

By [Emily Richmond](#)

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Nearly one of every 22 Clark County School District teachers on the first day of classes was a long-term substitute.

It amounted to 676 substitute teachers, many of whom have no specialized education in the subjects they were assigned to teach, or even a college degree.

For a school system under pressure to improve, it's a troubling number. Research suggests that substitute teachers,

particularly those who meet only the basic educational requirements, impede student achievement.

The district's northeast region, home to some of its lowest-achieving students, had the greatest need for long-term substitutes, with 160 filling in as of Monday.

Last school year, only 27 percent of the region's schools made "adequate yearly progress" as required by the federal No Child Left Behind law. By comparison, the southeast region, which had 77 long-term substitutes this week, had a 75 percent success rate under No Child Left Behind.

Long-term substitutes are often tapped for hard-to-fill positions in math, science and special education.

In most cases, the district is under no obligation to inform parents that a long-term substitute is assigned to their child's class. Only campuses that receive extra federal money, known as Title I funds, to help large populations of at-risk students are required to notify parents.

That troubles Clark County School Board member Carolyn Edwards, who says parents deserve to be notified so they can closely monitor their child's progress under a long-term substitute. At Thursday's School Board meeting, Edwards' colleagues agreed the policy deserves a closer look. Staff members will prepare a report outlining the current notification policy and potential effects of changes.

The mother of two district graduates, Edwards said parents with a child in a long-term substitute's classroom need to know whether the class is progressing through the textbook, whether the teacher is getting help from a full-time colleague at the school and whether the district is providing other assistance.

"All of those things should be in place," Edwards said. "But parents won't have a reason to ask if they aren't told that their kids are being taught by long-term subs."

Theo Thrower, 39, began working as a long-term substitute last school year. He had been kicking around the idea of teaching and his wife suggested he test the waters.

He was assigned to Roy Martin Middle School, where he filled in for a reading teacher who had left after the first semester. It went well enough that Thrower decided to do it again this school year, as a science teacher.

Thrower, who has a degree in criminal justice and marketing from UNLV, spent the summer reviewing the environmental science textbook. He said he found the class focuses on concepts and facts unchanged since his days in seventh grade.

"Topography and geography, ecosystems, fault lines, earthquakes — that's all the same," Thrower said. "Instructional techniques change, but the Great Barrier Reef is still the Great Barrier Reef."

Thrower's supervisor is an assistant principal who was a science major, and he meets regularly with the science faculty to go over strategies and lesson plans.

Martin Middle School Principal Mary Hafner said a background in a particular subject doesn't guarantee success in the classroom. "If I have someone who is high in content knowledge but can't manage the classroom or relate to the kids, it hampers rather than helps," she said.

While observing Thrower in the classroom, Hafner said, she realized he was a quick study on the course material, "and his manner with our children was just wonderful."

That isn't always the case.

At an open house at Spring Valley High School two years ago, Mary Jo Parise-Malloy met her daughter's geometry teacher and came away impressed. She didn't give the class more thought beyond asking her daughter about homework and test scores.

She was surprised a few months later, when, while her daughter entertained friends at home, she overheard them joking

about “how much fun” their geometry teacher was. The girls said they did nothing in class and often played blackjack, Parise-Malloy told the School Board on Thursday.

Only then did Parise-Malloy learn that the teacher she met had been replaced by a long-term substitute.

“Nobody informed me that geometry was being taught by a 23-year-old who was going to college,” said Parise-Malloy, who is co-founder of Nevadans for Quality Education, a community advocacy group.

Parise-Malloy said her daughter’s academic performance suffered because of poor instruction.

Bob Gerye, Spring Valley’s principal, said he was aware of the incident Parise-Malloy detailed for the School Board but couldn’t go into detail because it was a personnel matter.

He suggested parents shouldn’t draw conclusions about long-term substitutes based on a few bad experiences.

“Most long-term subs are of very good quality,” he said.

Nevada’s educational requirements for substitutes are more rigorous than those of at least 28 states, which require no more than a GED. The state requires that substitutes have a bachelor’s degree or at least 62 college credits, with six of those credits in a field related to education. Substitutes are also fingerprinted and undergo FBI background checks.

Researchers with the Substitute Teaching Institute at Utah State University found 90 percent of public school substitutes receive little or no training — three hours or fewer — before entering a classroom. Clark County requires a day and a half of training, putting it at the top of the heap, said Geoffrey Smith, a past director of the institute.

Although the district would like to use fewer long-term substitutes, Gerye said even with the dip in growth there’s little indication the situation will improve drastically.

More focus, he said, should be on the broader trend that has left so many unfilled vacancies for science and math teachers nationwide. Science graduates choose jobs in industry over education because the starting salaries are 50 percent to 100 percent higher, he said.

“It should be a concern to everyone,” Gerye said. “There’s competition all over the country.”