

Article: Teacher Shortages

Article: Bay Area schools are facing dire teacher shortages. The result: other staff running classrooms

Jill Tucker (September 18, 2021)



San Lorenzo Unified School District Superintendent Daryl Camp teaches a science class because of a teacher shortage at San Lorenzo High School.

Jessica Christian/The Chronicle

Three weeks into the school year, the San Lorenzo superintendent stood in a classroom, masked students behind him, and took a selfie.

The photo was unremarkable — desks, students, pencils. But the caption reflected the dire situation that many Bay Area school districts find themselves in: There are not enough teachers to staff classrooms and a host of other employees have to fill in.

“The teacher and substitute/guest teacher shortage is a real issue,” Daryl Camp wrote about his East Bay district. “In San Lorenzo USD, directors, principals, assistant superintendents and the superintendent are in classrooms trying to support school sites. Teachers are subbing during their prep time way too much.” Camp wasn’t just visiting the classroom; he was filling in as a teacher.

“I volunteer to cover classrooms because we’re short all over the place,” he said this week, adding it doesn’t help to know the problem is widespread. “It’s sort of like saying, ‘Everybody has been hit in the face.’”



Assistant Principal Donald Smith teaches a literacy class amid a teacher shortage at San Lorenzo High School.

Jessica Christian/The Chronicle

In classrooms across the Bay Area, substitutes, temporary teachers and in some cases top administrators have had to cover classrooms until a substitute or permanent and fully credentialed educator is hired to take the job.

In some cases, that lasted a few days. In other cases, weeks into the school year, district officials are still looking.

In recent days, San Lorenzo still had more than 20 teacher vacancies out of about 500 positions. While teacher vacancies at the start of school aren't uncommon — with last-minute resignations or a handful of hard-to-fill positions requiring a new hire — this year is worse.

The pandemic has exacerbated an existing teacher shortage, with more people leaving the profession than in years past, and not enough newcomers to take their place. That's especially true in special education, bilingual education and math. In addition, districts have piles of state and federal cash to spend on pandemic recovery, which includes adding support staff and teachers to address student needs.

There aren't nearly enough substitutes to cover vacancies or fill in for absences, which have increased as teachers — like other staff and students — stay home at the onset of any possible COVID-19 symptoms or because of required quarantine.

In Hayward, for example, the district had 53 teacher full- and part-time job openings last week out of about 1,100 total. At the same time, often half of the 80 to 100 requests for substitutes cannot be filled on any given day.

As is the case in most other districts, administrators or other qualified staff often step in to cover the classrooms.

"This is a problem that has been building for years," said Troy Flint, speaking for the California School Boards Association. "There's no question that the pandemic and our response to the pandemic in terms of trying to provide expanded learning and learning recovery opportunity, which are personnel intensive, have made a difficult hiring situation even more complicated."

Such shortages often hit some schools harder than others, with those in low-income urban communities and rural areas unable to lure candidates as easily as suburban and wealthy schools. That often leaves schools in disadvantaged neighborhoods with a disproportionate number of vacancies and frustrated staff.

In San Francisco, hiring is a big priority, with district officials doubling down on filling positions, said Jennifer Douglass, executive director of human resources for the San Francisco Unified School District. Staff members have recruited substitutes to enroll in teacher training programs to become permanent so they can take a classroom as an intern, and have called candidates to woo them and expedited the hiring process, she said.

In San Francisco, the district typically hires 500 to 600 teachers per year, with 99% filled by the first day of classes. This year, three weeks into the school year, there were still 45 positions unfilled, or nearly 10% of a year's average total new hires.

"We'll fill positions and then new positions might open up," Douglass said.

On Back-to-School Night at A.P. Giannini Middle School in San Francisco, the principal explained what eighth-grade math would be like for students in one class, where the teacher started the year but has been absent since the first week or so, said parent Patrick Wolff.



Social studies instructor Benjamin Hake teaches an English class amid a teacher shortage at San Lorenzo High School.

Jessica Christian/The Chronicle

While it's not officially announced, the teacher is apparently retiring, he said. A substitute, who has taught social studies in the past, has taken over the class.

"My daughter said the nice thing about math class right now is she gets to do her homework from her other classes during math," he said. "It's really unclear how much math instruction she's gotten this year."

Wolff, who co-founded the political action committee Campaign for Better San Francisco Public Schools to reform school board elections, acknowledged that the district is not alone in facing a shortage of teachers. But he wonders how long it will take to get a math teacher in his daughter's math class.

"Of course, it's very frustrating," he said.

Many openings are for special education teachers. With administrators and other staff covering classrooms, it means they are no longer doing their real job, which includes conducting the meetings with teachers and

parents to create an individualized education plan for each student who needs special services, said Alida Fisher, a district parent and special education advocate.

Even when those meetings are held, there isn't always the staffing to provide the services needed, given shortages of teachers, substitutes and teacher aides as well, she said. Because of the pandemic, those students need more mental health services to deal with the anxiety and fear after so long at home.

"It's been brutal," Fisher said. "Our teachers are amazing. They're miracle workers. I just wish we had more." California was already bracing for a growing teacher shortage. During the recession of 2007-09, districts were forced to lay off staff, including teachers. Based on labor agreements, those with the least seniority, and often the youngest teachers, were given the pink slips. That left an older workforce, with about 40% of educators 50 years or older, the California State Teachers Retirement System reported this year.



Nathan Embretson, a district-based teacher on special assignment for technology, substitute-teaches a chemistry class at San Lorenzo High School.

Jessica Christian/The Chronicle

Then the pandemic hit, and state schools saw a record number of teachers retiring in the second half of 2020, with an expected 16,000 retirements for 2020-21.

A survey found that 62% of those teachers decided to retire earlier than they had planned to, citing the challenges of teaching during the pandemic, working remotely and possible exposure to the coronavirus as reasons for doing so.

"The educator shortage, like the bus driver and other worker shortages around the country, should be characterized as a shortage in pay and working conditions," said Nathalie Hrizi, vice president of substitutes for the United Educators of San Francisco. "The crisis has been building for decades with no substantial changes made to prevent it and is now even more exacerbated by COVID."

State officials have stepped in to help fast-track new teachers into the profession, suspending testing requirements and easing transfers from other states, while also lifting restrictions on bringing back new retirees.

Still, some district officials say it's a brutal competition to attract candidates and some are offering signing bonuses to lure teachers.

The San Joaquin County community of Manteca got the jump on other districts, creating a hiring strategy in fall 2020 for this school year. They brought in 56 long-term substitutes last year to work at assigned school sites, at the ready to cover for vacancies or absences.

The district also hired teachers in the spring despite a lack of job openings at the time, knowing there would be teachers leaving during the summer. Still, it started the school year with seven vacancies and a deficit of 10 to 20 substitutes on any given day.

District officials say they are doing everything they can think of to fill vacancies.

Hayward Unified “is definitely feeling the impact of more teachers leaving the profession than in previous years and from a lower number of teachers and substitutes receiving their credentials,” said Kimberleigh Watts, assistant superintendent of human resources. “The pandemic exacerbated an already growing teacher shortage issue, and the district is doing everything within its means to recruit educators and place qualified teachers in every classroom.”

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