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Sharing the classroom

Instead of hiring subs, schools sometimes split classes

While Zucker Middle School teacher Amy Newsom scribbled math problems on her SmartBoard on Wednesday, three eighth-graders in the back of her classroom completely ignored her.

They carefully sketched basketball goals and steaming plates of bacon. Those students were drawing 15 detailed pictures representing themselves. It's exactly what they were supposed to be doing.

The school's art teacher took a few hours of personal leave that afternoon, and instead of the school hiring a substitute teacher for her classes, students were split up among other teachers' classes.

The school's faculty agreed last year that that's how they would handle one teacher's absence. They still call in substitutes when multiple teachers are absent on the same day.

This year, every Charleston County school came up with its own plan on what to do when teachers take personal or sick leave. Some say the new, schoolbased systems are working well because it saves money, improves teachers' attendance and ensures absent teachers' classes are covered. But others say it negatively affects teachers' instruction and morale, and that the system needs to change.

Superintendent Nancy McGinley wants schools to have the authority to decide which approach works best for them, but

she acknowledged the current situation has its flaws. She plans to make changes for next school year.

"We're struggling to increase accountability without harming the classroom and without demoralizing our best teachers," she said.

Cost-saving decision

When Charleston County schools officials scoured their budget last year for areas to save money, they zeroed in on substitute teachers.

The district typically had been spending far more than it budgeted — anywhere from \$300,000 to \$400,000 more — for substitute services.

Classroom teachers used a software program that allowed them to request a substitute as frequently as they wanted.

Teachers could ask for specific substitutes and vice versa, or the automated system would call the substitute teachers in its database to find someone for the job.

Although the district limits teachers' leave — teachers receive three personal leave days and 12 sick days each year — officials said the district lacked accountability for its overall substitute teacher budget.

They decided this year to change the system so each school received a certain amount of money for substitutes, enough roughly to cover each teacher taking 5.6

Elsewhere in the Lowcountry

BERKELEY COUNTY SCHOOLS: The district hired a new substitute-teacher staffing program, Kelly Educational Staffing®, for this school year. Officials said they wanted to make the change to Kelly® because it would be easier to fill vacancies; the company trains and provides high-quality substitutes; and it would save money. So far, the fill rate for when teachers are absent has been 99 percent, with 78 percent of substitute openings filled within an hour. Educators said they like the automated service, versus the method last year of making manual phone calls, and the majority of Kelly's substitutes are certified teachers. The district spent \$3.6 million on substitutes last year, and it's projecting to save an estimated \$500,000 from the change this year.

DORCHESTER 2 SCHOOLS: The suburban district has been using the same method, the Automated Substitute Placement and Absence Management System, for several years. Teachers can request substitute teachers through the Web-based system when they know they'll be absent, and substitutes can choose where they want to go. The system begins calling potential substitutes when assignments aren't picked up. The district spent \$1.2 million on substitute teachers last year, and the only recent change to its substitute teacher practices came two years ago when their pay was reduced to save money.

Source: Berkeley and Dorchester schools spokeswomen

days of leave. The district still would pick up the cost of teachers who qualified for extended time off mandated by the federal Family and Medical Leave Act.

The district's overall substitute budget shrank from \$2.3 million last school year to \$1.7 million this year, and schools came up with a range of plans. Some still use the district's former substitute system and plan to do so until their budget runs out. Others have hired permanent substitute teachers who rotate to absent teachers' classes, while others give teachers extra money for picking up absent teachers' classes during their planning periods.

Zucker Middle is one of at least 10 schools that are splitting classes when teachers are absent.

On Wednesday when the art teacher was absent, students figured out where they needed to go by going to the art teacher's class and reading a list on the door with their assigned rooms. Teachers took as few as three students from the absent teacher's class, while others took as many as nine.

The classes that absorbed the extra students still appeared to be running as planned, with teachers giving their lessons and sometimes incorporating the absent teacher's students in activities. In other classes, students did their art assignment.

The upside

The main reason for the change was to save money, and that appears to be happening. Halfway through the school year, most schools are within budget, and those that aren't should be soon, said Terri Shannon, the district's executive director of financial services.

But opinions vary on whether the change has been good for teachers and students. Some say it's an improvement because fewer teachers are missing school. For example, Zucker Middle School physical education teacher Brandon Blackley made sure he took advantage of his three personal leave days last school year, but he's trying for perfect attendance this year. The school agreed to split absent teachers' classes, and the trade-off is that at the end of the year, teachers who are out of the building for fewer than two days will divvy up a \$5,000 pot.

And Blackley doesn't mind picking up a few extra kids in his classes.

"It hasn't been bad," said Blackley, who is one of the school's 23 teachers eligible for the money. "(Students) come in with their work, and if they finish, they can play with us."

Jake Perlmutter, principal of Zucker Middle, has seen better attendance among his teachers this year. It took about a week for The Post and Courier to nail down a day when his school's classes would be divided because of a teacher absence.

Teachers who might have taken a whole day for an appointment might take only a few hours now, Perlmutter said. And even when the school used the district's call-in system, substitutes often wouldn't commit to his school, leaving teachers scrambling to find supervision for their students, he said.

Outside of the substitute budget being restored, "this is a great alternative," he said.

The downside

The Charleston Teacher Alliance, a nonprofit teacher advocacy group, surveyed the district's 3,500 teachers, and 956 responded. Of those, 60.6 percent said their school's substitute policy has a negative impact on instruction, and 69.3 percent said it has a negative effect on teacher morale.

In the comment section of the survey, multiple teachers talked about students being forced to sit on the floor when classes are split because their rooms didn't have enough desks or chairs.

Others talked about feeling guilty for taking any leave, even if they're legitimately sick. One teacher said her co-worker came to work sick because she didn't want to use sick days and ended up in the hospital.

Prompted by the survey's results, Kent Riddle, chairman of the alliance and a teacher at Angel Oak Elementary on Johns Island, has asked McGinley and the school board to revert to its previous substitute practice because the current one isn't working in all schools. He suggested using money from the district's \$34.4 million rainy day fund to cover the relatively small cost of substitutes. The district's general operating budget this year is \$334.3 million.

"It would be really easy to fix," he said.

Going forward

McGinley said the district has been able to increase its reserves because it's been fiscally conservative and made cuts, such as curtailing its substitutes. The district

can't continue to go back and dip into that money, she said.

McGinley doesn't want to go back to when schools have an "open checkbook" to request substitutes as much as they want, but she said the district needs to address some of the issues that have come up this school year.

"I do not want this initiative to save money to end up stressing out or harming or demoralizing our good teachers," she said. "I do not want teachers to come to school when they're sick. I don't want people feeling as if they don't have their preparation periods."

McGinley is planning to perform further cost-benefit analysis of how the current system is working before making any decisions about what would change. Other issues that have surfaced this year include schools where teachers weren't given an opportunity to decide on the substitute system that would be used, and schools that changed principals, leaving new leaders to implement plans they didn't develop.

"I don't want it to hurt morale, but I do want to get the attention of teachers who were very inclined to just use these days as an entitlement for non-illness and abuse the system," McGinley said. ■

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