

**Pennsylvania Senate and House Education Committees
Comments on Substitute Teacher Shortage
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**Presented by
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Good afternoon Chairman Smucker, Chairman Saylor and distinguished members of the Senate and House Education Committees. Thank you for providing this opportunity to share the challenges faced by school districts through our Commonwealth to adequately fill classrooms with qualified substitute teachers. My name is Mike Leichter. I currently serve as the Superintendent of the Penn Manor School District and have been in my present position since July 2009. Penn Manor is one of sixteen public school districts in Lancaster County and one of eight within Chairman Smucker's senatorial district.

This is my 25th year serving as a public educator in Pennsylvania. During my career I have also served as a middle school and high school history teacher in York County, as well as a high school assistant principal and middle school principal in Lancaster County. In each position I was quite aware of the importance of a strong pool of substitute teachers but never had to worry about returning to find that my classroom or one within my building did not have a substitute teacher for the students.

Pennsylvania has traditionally been the beneficiary of a situation in which teacher supply outweighs demand. We are now faced with a situation in which the need for substitutes in our county and state is higher than the individuals found on our daily substitute rolls. This is a new experience for Penn Manor, a suburban school district with strong academic success as well as wonderful and respectful students. In my nine years as a building level principal, I can count on one hand the number of days in which I had to scramble to arrange classroom coverage, or cover a classroom myself as a principal due to substitute shortages. Today, the realities are quite different. According to data maintained by Penn Manor's Human Resources Department, during the 2013-2014 school year 116 classroom vacancies in Penn Manor were left unfilled. During the 2014-2015 school year the number more than doubled to 286 classroom vacancies. October is not a high demand month in schools. Eight weeks into the school year we are already trending slightly ahead of last year's statistics for this same time period. For example, during the week of October 19th we had three unfilled classrooms on Tuesday, three on Wednesday, and

two on Thursday. In past years it was very unusual to experience unfilled positions mid-week as Friday was the typical day when we could experience shortages.

What is the practical impact on schools and principals? With the increased demands for academic success, the main responsibility on the shoulders of our building principals has shifted to instructional leadership as opposed to building management. However, principals who have unfilled classrooms spend an inordinate amount of time scrambling to arrange classroom coverage or end up teaching the classes themselves. They quickly become managers and their educational leadership functions take a back seat to the crisis before them. Here is a recent account from Dr. Jennifer Sugra, Principal of Martic Elementary School in Penn Manor:

I love my job and always wake up early with a smile on my face. It is 5:00 AM and I am hopeful that the one unfilled request for a substitute in the online teacher absence system I checked before going to sleep was filled overnight by an individual searching for a position. In the dark I grab my cellphone to log into the system, still hopeful. However, the yellow circle that indicates an uncovered employee grows in size and has the number 2 in it. Instant exhaustion.

I begin emailing and calling potential substitutes, begging in the most humble form possible in the hope that I can convince someone to substitute at Martic. I contact all of the other principals in the district and hope they can throw me a lifeline with an "extra substitute." This is generally a foreign concept and some report back that they too are down substitute coverage.

All of the calling, begging and bribing has left me tired and now also late to school. I rush to work, wondering the entire time how I am going to cover classrooms and who might be available to help. The ride to work continues as I call substitutes from my cellphone while driving to school. My mind wanders to the big question of which meetings can I cancel so I can cover for the teacher? The game at school becomes the patchwork of coverage of available professionals within the building. I spend the entire hour before children arrive mapping out how I am going to cover the two classrooms in my building. I use strategies like combining classes, cancelling academic support groups which target academically below proficient students, reassigning the schedules of art, music, and physical education teachers, canceling meetings with teachers related to classroom observations/evaluations as well as meetings with parents related to their child's needs so that I can help to cover these classes and make it an educationally productive day for the classroom of children impacted by the shortage.

I send out the coverage schedule to the impacted staff and go to the classroom and write the schedule of coverage on the board regarding who is teaching and for which subject/timeslot. I worry about the quality of education as I write the list and think about

the revolving door of faces for the young children in my school. I am now exhausted . . . and the students have not yet arrived.

This is realistic picture of what occurred last year for nearly 300 classrooms in Penn Manor. Why are we encountering this situation in Pennsylvania? Secretary Rivera and the Pennsylvania Department of Education as well as other agencies and institution have provided some excellent information on the economic impacts from the 2008 recession as well as trends in the number of individuals securing Pennsylvania teacher certification.

While I will focus on one potential solution that I am most interested in pursuing, I would like to highlight for this panel one area that has exasperated the demand for substitutes in Penn Manor as well as other school districts. Senator Smucker and I often talk about the term “mandate” and the impact that laws and statutes have on the day-to-day operations of a school. Public education in and of itself is a mandate and one for which I am a passionate advocate. However, the number of specific mandates requiring additional trainings has led to the increased demand in schools for substitute teachers. Revised Pennsylvania Core Standards, updates to Child Protective Service requirements, Youth Suicide Awareness and Prevention, Educator Effectiveness, Student Learning Objectives, expanded requirements regarding PSSA, PVAAS, and Standards Aligned System components, All Hazards/Safe Schools Planning, special education requirements . . . these are a few of the areas that, as a result of state and federal mandates, have significantly increased the need to provide additional professional development training for educators since I have been a school superintendent. Each law or mandate mentioned is an important area but has a direct impact on schools and the limited time we have available for professional development. As the number of requirements have expanded beyond the dedicated professional development days allotted locally, school districts like Penn Manor have been forced to pull teachers from classrooms, and arrange substitute coverage in order to meet the additional needs and requirements. As our pool of substitutes has shrunk to cover the routine sick day and personal day needs of teachers, the number of professional days for teachers has grown which as further contributed to our current crisis. I respectfully request that members of the General Assembly consider this impact as additional training requirements are considered for educators.

I agree with my colleague Dr. Eric Eshbach and fellow member of the Pennsylvania Association of School Administrators on the potential solutions he presented on behalf of our association. There is one potential avenue for increasing our substitute pool that particularly interests me. As a student at Grove City College in western Pennsylvania more than 25 years ago I had a friend from a neighboring state who

would substitute in his home school district during school breaks and in the month of May after college was dismissed for the summer. The state where he lived permitted individuals who earned a two-year associates degree, or its equivalent in collegiate credits, to serve as an emergency-certified substitute teacher. He loved this idea because as an education major it gave him practical experience in classrooms as well as provided extra income. This really interests me as Millersville University of Pennsylvania is located within the boundaries of Penn Manor School District. Our two institutions have a long history of working together to benefit our community and this idea has come up in recent conversations. I encourage the members of this committee to explore options that would permit education majors in the Pennsylvania Department of Education approved teacher preparations programs throughout the state to apply for a "guest teacher" status within the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. There would obviously need to be carefully defined regulations and procedures including the number of collegiate credits required as well as institutional approvals certifying that the student is an education major in good standing. This is certainly not a solution that would solve all of our challenges. However, this would provide some relief for the majority of schools throughout Pennsylvania during certain times of the year like the period between the end of the spring college term and the end of the K-12 school term as May is traditionally a time when there is a high need for substitute teachers. In the case of Penn Manor and other school districts located within close physical proximity to teacher preparation programs, it could provide a steady stream of qualified individuals to supplement our substitute teacher supply throughout the school year. I have met many college students who I am sure would love to gain practical experience in classrooms through this type of opportunity. While we know that the daily substitute pay rate is not necessarily a living wage for a family, it would provide a nice supplement for college student financial needs.

Thank you for your interest in this topic. Students in the Penn Manor School District deserve a high quality education delivered by a qualified teacher each and every day they are present in our classrooms. Unfortunately, I cannot sit before you today and say this is the case for the students for whom I am responsible as Superintendent of Schools. While the need for a larger pool of substitute teachers is not a complex policy issue, it is a pressing problem in our school system for which we need to work together to find creative and practical solutions. Our children deserve more than we are currently able to deliver. I am at your service should you have any further questions. Thank you.