

Socrates, Jesus and Gandhi: Toward Reform in Substitute Teaching

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Socrates, Jesus and Gandhi dispensed wisdom for free, and all 3 died as martyrs. Socrates and Jesus died at the hands of the state, and Gandhi through the treachery of an assassin. The lesson seems to be that teaching is perilous when done with the purist of motives and without pay. Substitute Teachers should take heed, for though they do not teach for free, they come close enough to it to be the modern equivalents of this trio of philosophical and religious revolutionaries. The woes of substitute teaching are not, of course, philosophical and religious but rather economic. Fortunately, radical reform is not necessary, only that schools reward substitutes in ways they already reward their regular teachers.

The most intractable problem may be pay. One district in Utah pays only \$33 a day, others in Louisiana pay \$35, and rural districts throughout the country pay \$40 (Cobb, 2001; Toppo, 2001). Some large urban districts pay much more. Los Angeles Unified School District pays \$200 a day, but such pay is the exception (Cobb, 2001). The norm in New York is between \$55 and \$60 per day and the national average not much higher at \$65 to \$70 (Esch, 2002; Cobb, 2001). These numbers translate into poverty. Consider the Mesquite Independent School District in Texas, which pays substitutes with a BS or AS degree but with no teaching certificate a base of \$60 per day with an increase to \$65 after the eleventh day of work (Mesquite Independent School District, 2002). At 180 days, a full academic year, a Mesquite substitute would earn \$11,650, less than \$1,000 above the \$10,712 someone would make for a year at minimum wage. It is easy to say that substitutes work fewer days than people in most occupations, but this is a red herring. The real issue is that substitutes are on a par with Taco Bell workers. This is no slight against them, for they are essential to our economy, but shouldn't we

value teaching, even when done on a contingent basis, more highly than the ability to make a bean burrito? Even worse, the median income in the U.S. for a male with only a high school diploma is \$27,240 more than double what a Mesquite substitute with a college degree would earn (U.S. Department of Commerce, 2001). The median income for a male with a BA or BS degree is \$47,325, more than quadruple the income of a Mesquite substitute with the same education (U.S. Department of Commerce, 2001). A problem this severe requires initiatives on multiple fronts.

The traditional remedy is for districts to increase pay in increments as substitutes pass predetermined thresholds of consecutive days in the same assignment. Forsyth County Schools in Georgia pay substitutes a base of \$60 a day, which increases to \$70 on the eleventh day in the same assignment (Forsyth County Schools). This approach is inadequate on two grounds. First, the substitute on an extended assignment is the de facto teacher and must plan lessons, grade papers, keep a record of attendance, monitor students in the cafeteria, and perform whatever other duties are part of the routine. The substitute who is in every respect a proxy for a regular teacher should earn full pay, not \$70 a day. Second, this approach conflates consecutiveness with longevity. Education, like many professions, rewards employees for longevity on the assumption that experience improves performance. Salary schedules codify this practice, paying teachers more for each year in a district. Longevity however, has nothing to do with consecutiveness. Two second-year teachers in the same district with the same credentials will earn the same pay even though one had perfect attendance the first year, amassing 180 consecutive days, while the other missed several days. Schools ought to treat substitutes the same way, rewarding them for longevity irrespective of the number of consecutive days they work, for this is beyond their control. Ayer Public Schools in Massachusetts pays substitutes a base of \$60 a day, increasing this amount to \$70 once they have surpassed 50 days in the system (Ayer Public Schools). A district in Berkeley, California rewards longevity another way, paying substitutes who have accumulated at least 80 days a \$700 bonus (Toppo, 2001).

As promising as these moves are, they are only a start. A more ambitious reform would be to index substitute pay to regular teacher pay. The Oregon Department of Education had done just that, setting daily pay for substitutes in its public schools at 85% of 1/190 of \$29,064, the average pay of first year teachers in Oregon with a BA or BS (Substitute Teacher Pay, 2001). This translates into \$130.02 a day. After 11 days at the same assignment, substitute pay rises to 100% or \$152.97 a day, recognition that the substitute in such a position is the equivalent of the regular teacher (Substitute Teacher Pay, 2001). Pay, if it is to be an instrument of economic justice, must follow the reality that teachers, substitute and full-time alike, are equally engaged in challenging students to think cogently. This is not a commodity that can be bought cheap, a reality Oregon's pay reflects. To expand the Oregon model to the nation would transform substitute teaching. The average starting salary for public school teachers in 1999-2000, according to the latest year the Bureau of Labor Statistics has on record, was \$27,989 (U.S. Department of Labor, 2002). The substitute paid on par with this salary would earn, assuming a 180-day year, \$155.49 a day, more than double the current average.

Another reform would be to index pay to substitutes, level of education, as schools do for regular teachers. The presumption that additional education improves the quality of instruction should hold for teachers at all levels and in all capacities. The policy would be inexpensive, for I suspect few substitutes have an MA or Ph.D., but those who do should receive pay commensurate with their degree. In the same way, schools might index pay to their substitutes, level of experience, perhaps awarding credit for military service or corporate experience. The correspondent who writes freelance articles for the local newspaper and who writes limpid, jargon-free prose on deadline can teach by example, showing students where to prune the deadwood from an essay. Isn't this substitute worth a few extra dollars? Schools are no enclave, and students appreciate the value of real world experience, value schools would make explicit by paying substitutes accordingly.

An index would of course depend on a base rate for substitutes. Ideally public schools would standardize their base, at least for districts in a county. Administrators might object that schools do not pay regular teachers uniformly across districts. Why should substitutes be a special case? The problem is that pay varies more for substitutes across districts than for regular teachers. Canton City Schools in Ohio pay substitutes a base of \$72 a day whereas the neighboring metropolitan district, Massillon City, pays only \$45, less than two-thirds of Canton's rate (Handbook for Substitute Teachers, 2001; L. Berkebile, personal communication, November 7, 2001). By comparison Canton City pays its regular teachers a base of \$28,516, and Perry Local Schools, the district contiguous with both Canton and Massillon City, pays \$26,300, 92% of Canton's base (R. Needing, personal communication, November 7, 2001; Agreement between the Perry Classroom Teachers, Association and the Perry Local Schools Board of Education, 2001). The pay for regular teachers across districts turns out to vary with a narrow margin. Standard pay for substitutes would achieve the same goal, bringing equity to a school's most vulnerable employees. Districts would benefit as much as substitutes from this policy, freeing themselves from the need to recalibrate their pay to keep within, say, \$5 of a neighboring district for fear of losing substitutes if it lags too far behind the pack. Districts might agree to let their pay sink to the lowest level, the \$45 of Massillon for example, in homage to David Ricardo's Iron Law of Wages. Somewhere above parsimony is a base that all districts in a county can afford and that meets the subsistence needs of substitutes.

A more far-reaching reform would be for schools to let substitutes declare a home district, one through which they could become eligible for perks. The most basic is medical insurance. A home district might allow its substitutes to buy insurance at the same rate as regular teachers pay. Because many, though not all, substitutes are young and enjoy good health, as a group they would be net contributors to the pool of money available for medical care. A frugal district might contain costs by requiring substitutes who want coverage to buy into a managed-care plan.

Schools and unions are taking belated steps toward this goal. Districts in Boston offer subsidized coverage, and the Los Angeles Unified School District offers full coverage to substitutes who worked at least 100 days the previous year (Toppo, 2001; Cobb, 2001). The Southern Adirondack Substitute Teachers Alliance in New York offers its members coverage at a group rate (Esch, 2002). Even disciplinary organizations are joining the cause. The Modern Language Association, which any substitute can join, offers members coverage at discount (Modern Language Association, 2001). Unions may offer the best hope for substitutes. The American Federation of Teachers has more than 50 locals, many of which negotiate coverage for part-time instructors, higher education's equivalent of substitutes, at colleges and universities (Higher Education Department, American Federation of Teachers). There is no reason why unions cannot duplicate this success for substitute teachers. The most direct route to this goal would be for local teachers unions, a staple of public education, to absorb substitutes into their ranks. Substitutes would not be the only winners. Unions would benefit by gaining new members, dues, and bargaining power.

A home district might also let its substitutes defer a fraction of their pay for distribution during summer and holidays, as is the case for regular teachers. A district might allow substitutes to choose the fraction or, to simplify the accounting, mandate that those who want to defer some of their pay deduct, say, 20% from each pay for that purpose. In principle, substitutes might elect to defer a fraction of pay in all districts in which they work. To simplify the accounting, I will suppose that they will only be able to choose this option in their home district.

In the same spirit, substitutes might defer a fraction of pay from work at their home district to an annuity sponsored by that district. Again, whether a substitute or district chooses the fraction is a trifle. What is important is that a home district allows substitutes to save for their retirement. Perry, for example, offers its regular teachers an annuity in which they contribute up to \$1000 of their income before taxes per

year, which the district matches to \$700, at an annual yield, which though variable, hovers around 7% (Agreement between the Perry Classroom Teachers, Association and the Perry Local Schools Board of Education, 2001). For Perry, or another district, to expand its annuity to substitutes would not be cheap, but it could contain costs by matching dollar for dollar to \$200 or perhaps matching only 20 cents to the dollar and capping annual investment at \$500. Substitutes might of course complain that a partial match is unfair, but it would be better than nothing and, in combination with the other actions in this article, would improve their pay and perks. This objection aside, the formula for investment hardly matters; what matters is that schools take some discrete step, and it need not be large, to help substitutes build a foundation of assets for retirement.

A home district could cement its commitment to its substitutes by appointing some fraction of them to a core, a group of substitutes to whom a district guarantees work every day at a bonus rate. Canton City, for example, employs its core between mid September and mid May, paying its members \$80 per day rather than its base of \$72 (Handbook for Substitute Teachers, 2001). The difference is not trivial, for at 150 days (an estimate that grants districts freedom to employ their core at less than a full academic year), \$8 a day translates into an additional \$1200.

A final perk might be for a home district to give its substitutes sick days, by which I mean days off with pay, a concept foreign to the corporate world but a staple of public education. This makes obvious sense for a core, people who work every day in a district and whose absences can be easily tallied. But it also makes sense for the larger community of substitutes. Under the current system an ill substitute has two choices: work or recuperate at home without pay. It is a Hobson's choice for some, and they come to school, spreading germs to students and staff alike. Forlorn administrators then wonder why absenteeism runs high during winter. For the public good, a home district should grant its substitutes, whether core or not, sick days. Again this action is not cheap, but districts can pare expenses by allotting, say, two sick days per year to each substitute. This

number is only 13% of the 15 sick days that regular teachers in many districts accrue annually, underscoring the modest scope of this reform.

Indeed this package of reforms is not grand. It demands no radical restructuring of public schools, no Marxian revolution for the downtrodden. Its virtue is its gradualism, a gradualism that gives substitutes concrete gains at small expense. It preserves a district's primary financial commitment to its students and regular staff and asks little, if anything, extra from taxpayers.

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