

Strongsville City Schools

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Chair Manning, Vice Chair Bird, Ranking Member Robinson, and members of the House Primary and Secondary Education Committee. Thank you for the opportunity to speak to you today regarding House Bill (HB) 583. I am Jennifer Pelko, Assistant Superintendent of Strongsville City Schools. I am here today to testify in support of HB 583.

As you may know the last 2 years has proven very difficult to procure substitutes for certificated absences. About 4-5 years ago we would have approximately 80 substitutes for our over 300 + certificated staff to begin the year and slowly the number would climb to over 100 as the year went on. During the pandemic our numbers have drastically decreased to approximately 40 substitutes who will work on a regular basis. When we started back to school in January of 2021 we had to revert back to remote learning due to lack of substitutes for approximately 3 weeks. Throughout the 2021-2022 school year we were unable to offer any professional development to our staff when they needed it the most. We had to implement asynchronous student days in order to provide ongoing support for our teachers. This year we have been able to hire 15 additional subs due to the afforded flexibility. Even with COVID cases numbers dwindling, we are still not seeing an adequate increase to our sub pool.

Currently, our fill rates on a daily basis average between 75% - 81% and that is after we are canceling professional development, often the morning of, to keep teachers in the classroom. Regularly, encore classes or intervention classrooms go unfilled as our priority has to be the general education classroom at the elementary level. In addition, we must have our administrators cover classes and also average approximately 50 teachers per week giving up their planning periods to cover classes. Prior to Covid our fill rates were consistently at a healthy 96% - 98% however there were still times that we had to cancel professional development for our teachers if we had a shortage which allowed us to get to the higher fill rate percentage. You also have to remember that we are competing for the same sub pool with our surrounding districts. Increasing the monetary compensation does not seem to attract more as we are all dealing with an overall shortage.

There are many instances where the temporary substitute flexibility provided in the 20-21 and 21-22 school years has helped us to place a quality substitute in a classroom for students when one could not be found. Like our regular substitutes our flexible substitutes need to take the same trainings for courses like child abuse or harassment. Additionally, we have also allowed them to shadow for a day or two prior to being placed in an assignment to gain their footing and feel comfortable. I have great concerns that if we are not permitted to keep these substitutes in place that we will not be able to provide much needed professional development like our LETRS training which is essential to building systematic reading instruction for our students. I am concerned that we will have even more vacancies as additional teachers are now requesting FMLA due to surgeries that have been delayed due to the pandemic.

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I have appreciated the opportunity to allow districts to set the criteria for these non-traditional substitutes. We have been able to hire recent graduates who are home from college who are 21 years of age. It has allowed us to hire some PTA members who know the students and are familiar with our schools already. One component we added was that the applicant had to have some experience working with children, such as coaching, summer camps, pursuing an education degree or teaching children in some way. While most of our flexible subs were pursuing a Bachelors in Education, we have not required an associate degree or a set number of hours. In one instance we had a flexible sub who had stopped pursuing his degree and was questioning what direction he wanted to go in his life. He obtained a temporary sub license and this allowed him to reaffirm his desire to go back to school and finish his Education Degree. Another is our wrestling coach and he's also pursuing his degree in education. Allowing him to gain classroom experience has been mutually beneficial. He is able to help us out two days a week when he is not in class and it's made him much more confident in his decision to pursue his degree in Education. We have yet another sub who has been a special education aide sub for us while she's been pursuing her degree as an Intervention Specialist. She's been able to get a temporary teaching license through this program and step in as the teacher. This has given her more confidence in the classroom and as she approaches graduation, will be much more experienced heading into potential job interviews. These may not have been possible had we had restrictions on hours towards bachelors or associate degrees. Having too many restrictions will put us back in the same situation we were in prior to the pandemic.

I want to thank both Representative Bird and Representative Jones for sponsoring the bill and hope it will become law before the 22-23 school year as it will help as we post for openings and look to build our substitute pool.

I urge you to approve HB 583. Thank you for your time and attention. I am happy to answer any questions committee members might have at this time.