



# LESSONS IN LEARNING

The replacements –  
Non-permanent teachers

November 13, 2008

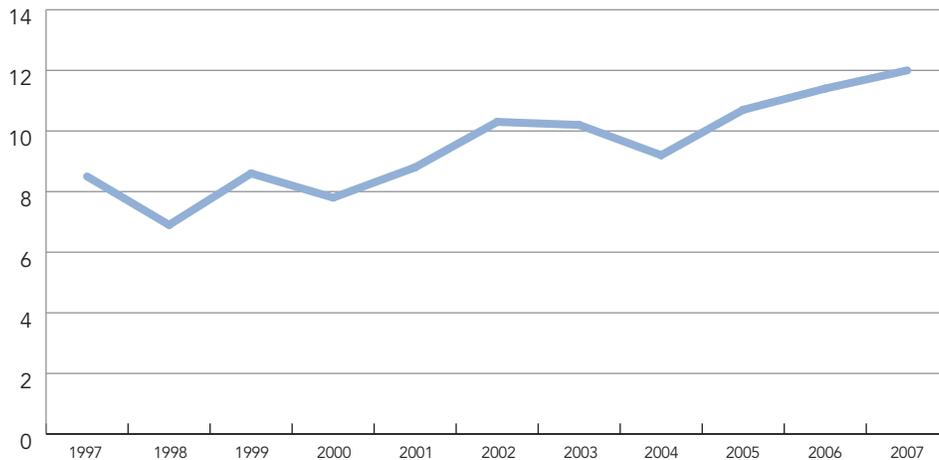
Non-permanent teachers have a substantive impact on student learning and play an integral role in Canada's education systems.<sup>1,2,3</sup> As with permanent teachers, non-permanent teachers benefit from specialized pre-service preparation and continuing professional development, yet education and training geared toward non-permanent teachers is largely ignored.

*Why should we be aware of occasional teachers?*

Non-permanent teachers are known by a multitude of titles: substitute teachers, supply teachers, occasional teachers, and teachers on call. In Canada, one-fifth of the teacher labour force works in non-permanent teaching positions.<sup>4</sup> In a child's schooling from Kindergarten through Grade 12, he or she will be taught by a non-permanent teacher the equivalent of one full year.<sup>5,6,7,8</sup>

In 2007, teachers were absent an average of 12 days per year as a result of illness, disability, and personal or family responsibilities.<sup>9</sup> Teacher absence rates have been growing steadily over the last decade (see Figure 1) and, consequently, the role on non-permanent teachers has also been growing. In addition to absences due to illness and family responsibilities, teachers are regularly away from the classroom in order to pursue professional development opportunities. Educational policy changes have required more professional learning for the teaching profession which, in turn, requires a greater contribution from the non-permanent teacher workforce.<sup>10</sup>

**Figure 1:**  
Average number of days lost per teacher per year



Source: Statistics Canada, 2006 Census: Data Products.

The non-permanent teacher workforce also plays a significant role within the teacher supply and demand cycle. In times of teacher shortage, like the province of Alberta is currently experiencing in specific subject areas and rural regions,<sup>11</sup> education systems turn to the pool of non-permanent teachers to fill vacancies. On the other hand, in times of teacher surplus—such as Ontario is currently experiencing—more teachers will work in the non-permanent teacher workforce and for longer time periods before securing a full-time, permanent position.<sup>12,13</sup>

In order for students not to lose precious time for learning, the work of non-permanent teachers needs to be as seamless as possible. Non-permanent teachers need to be able to move in and out of classrooms with minimal disruption so that all students can receive the education that they deserve.

In most cases, recent graduates' first teaching experience in the education system will be a position as a non-permanent teacher.<sup>14</sup> In such situations non-permanent teachers new to the profession will be in working arrangements that require additional skills and knowledge,<sup>15</sup> yet they are often poorly supported and prepared for these positions.<sup>16,17,18</sup>

Except for a few local initiatives, there is little preparation for non-permanent teachers. Teacher education programs, school districts and school boards, and teacher federations (unions and professional associations) might play a greater part in supporting non-permanent teachers.

## Lessons in Learning: Providing Training for Non-Permanent Teachers

### *Lessons for teacher education programs*

All potential teacher candidates will have some contact with non-permanent teachers if they pursue a career in teaching. Many new teachers will enter the workforce as non-permanent teachers. But even if they do begin as full-time teachers, non-permanent teachers will have to ensure the continuity of instruction in their classes when they are absent. However, few teacher-education programs focus on the work of non-permanent teachers. The few teacher-preparation programs that do attempt some support generally offer end of program workshops conducted in collaboration with union locals and federations. These often focus on how to get hired or the rights of a non-permanent teacher, rather than how non-permanent teachers can contribute to student learning.

One way teacher education programs might support non-permanent teachers is through instruction on the planning that is necessary in the event of their absence (i.e., what planning is required for the non-permanent teacher to ensure the continuity of instruction).<sup>19</sup> By highlighting the differences that exist between permanent and non-permanent teaching, faculties of education might provide all teacher candidates with the opportunity to learn some of the basic strategies and pedagogical concepts of non-permanent teaching. This might provide a better understanding of this particular work, help those who eventually engage in non-permanent teaching, and provide insight for those who leave lessons for a non-permanent teacher.

### *Lessons for school districts and school boards*

In some jurisdictions, school districts and school boards play an active role in negotiating local contractual agreements, structuring how non-permanent teachers access their work, and providing professional learning opportunities. In numerous jurisdictions across Canada, there are orientation evenings/sessions for non-permanent teachers.<sup>20</sup> These pre-service/orientation workshops, generally conducted prior to the beginning of the school year, are one way to support non-permanent teachers. However, these sessions usually focus on work issues, such as how to apply for work with boards, or how the local call-out system works. Non-permanent teachers have indicated that additional training regarding district policies, practices, and philosophy as well as follow-up staff development programs throughout the year would also be beneficial.<sup>21,22,23</sup>

Providing opportunities for non-permanent teachers to attend sanctioned school board or school district professional development is one way to encourage the professional learning of teachers who do not work in permanent teaching positions. Even when these opportunities are available, many non-permanent teachers are unaware of them.<sup>24</sup> One way school districts and school boards can ensure that information for non-permanent teachers is handed down is through some type of reliable communication system.<sup>25</sup>

### *Lessons for teacher federations/unions/associations*

Some teacher associations have begun to provide training for their non-permanent teachers by developing handbooks and organizing conferences. For instance, the Nova Scotia Teachers' Union (NSTU) produces a resource entitled, *A handbook for substitute teachers: Helping you to survive & thrive in the classroom*. The NSTU also holds professional development workshops on Classroom Management and Enhancing Your Professionalism. The Alberta Teachers' Association has run an annual conference for non-permanent teachers since 1986. The conference includes a number of sessions consisting of "skill-development, information-exchange, inspirational and social aspects so that delegates can participate in a worthwhile professional development experience".<sup>26</sup> The Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario (ETFO) has created a classroom resource entitled, *I am the teacher: Classroom management for the occasional teacher*.<sup>27</sup> ETFO also intends to sponsor workshops that focus on literacy, numeracy, and differentiated instruction.<sup>28</sup>

### *Lessons for provincial ministries of education*

Ministries and departments of education could also play a central organizational and logistical role in supporting training and professional development for non-permanent teachers. They could provide opportunities for professional development that meets the specific needs of non-permanent teachers.<sup>29</sup>

Ontario took one initiative to learn more about occasional teaching that occurred in Ontario. In 2007, the province of Ontario surveyed non-permanent teachers who held a long-term occasional (LTO) teaching position at the time of the survey or within the school years 2005–2006 and 2006–2007. The study helped to identify the professional learning needs of beginning teacher LTOs,<sup>30</sup> which ultimately

informed new policy: the Ministry permitted school boards to use funds from the New Teacher Induction Program (NTIP) to support beginning teachers in LTO positions starting in the 2007–2008 school year.

Non-permanent teachers play an important role in the education of our youth. Like all teachers, non-permanent teachers need support. Teacher-education programs, school districts and school boards, teacher associations, provincial ministries and departments of education can support non-permanent teachers in a complementary fashion, enhancing their professional practices and their contribution to student learning.

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