

There's No Substitute for a Good Substitute Teacher

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Abstract

The onslaught of COVID 19 forced the closures of schools, but upon their gradual reopening the need for high quality substitute school teachers was at an all-time high. Although many school districts were in need well before the pandemic struck, this disease illuminated the fact that substitute teachers across the nation were in short supply. In an economic environment where other jobs may offer higher pay, more benefits, less stress, and more professional respect, the ranks of quality substitute teachers has continued to dwindle.

Competent and capable substitute teachers provide a reliable bridge for student learning when university trained and state licensed teachers are temporarily unavailable. This paper discusses specific causes of the substitute shortage, how varying school districts are impacted by the problem, and offers specific guidance regarding how to make significant improvements in both the short and long-term supply through better identification, recruitment, and ongoing support of substitute teachers.

Keywords: substitute teacher, shortage, urban, recruitment strategies, retention strategies, student achievement, teacher absenteeism, mentoring, pandemic

The Corona Virus pandemic coupled with a highly competitive employment environment merged to create a perfect storm for schools in need of substitute teachers. Since 2019, a majority of school districts across America, regardless of their demographic status have cited increasing needs for qualified substitute teachers. Unfortunately for many urban school districts, the ensuing three years have only exacerbated an already existing problem.

As some of the ill-effects of online learning for K – 12 students became more evident throughout 2020; parent demand for students' return to traditional classrooms became louder. Not only had the rapid, unplanned and often unsuccessful switch to remote teaching resulted in tremendous loss in student achievement, but many parents were forced to juggle jobs, child care, and semi-home schooling responsibilities. With the wave of a national return to in-person learning movement, most schools put in place COVID testing protocols; mask mandates, handwashing and sanitizing stations, and physical distancing requirements. However, there remained one issue that the National Institute of Health had no immediate recommendations for: What schools should do when classroom teachers are sick or unable to work and there is no one available to fill their roles?

Prior to COVID, many school districts already had concerns regarding teacher absenteeism. The National Council on Teacher Quality (2014) conducted a study to examine how often teachers are absent from the classroom and what factors influence their attendance? Using school district data for 40 of the country's largest metropolitan areas for the 2012 – 2013 school years, they found:

- On average, public school teachers were in the classroom 94 percent of the school year, missing nearly 11 days out of a 186-day school year, and;
- 16 percent of all teachers were classified as chronically absent because they missed 18 days or more in the school year, accounting for almost a third of all absences. (NCTQ, 2014).

During the COVID pandemic, the demand for substitute teachers increased, frequently surpassing the supply. Combined with the pandemic's uncertain health effects and ongoing mutations and variations, when in-school instruction returned some districts have had to briefly close due to quarantined faculty and unavailable substitutes to take their places. As recently as January 2022, Bloomberg News reported accelerating school closings across the U.S.

as omicron infections ensnared teachers and other staffing shortages. This source further stated, “The speed of this COVID-19 surge led to large districts like Atlanta, Detroit, and Prince George’s County in Maryland to adopt remote instruction just days into the new year, often leaving parents little time to readjust schedules.” (Bloomberg News, 2022).

To further illustrate the sparsity of available substitutes, WKRC-TV in Cincinnati, Ohio also reported in January 2022 “More districts close temporarily due to staffing shortages brought on by COVID.” The Lakota Local Schools, in a message to parents stated there were school buildings without a principal or assistant principal and several schools without nurses. Absences were also impacting busing, nutrition, and custodial staff. (WKRC, 2022)

The desperate need for substitute teachers has dealt harsh blows to states and school districts both large and small. In January 2022, the Associate Press reported New Mexico as the first state in the nation to ask National Guard troops to serve as substitute teachers as preschools and K – 12 public schools struggled to keep classrooms open amid surging COVID 19 infections. Governor Michelle Grisham said that school districts and preschools were seeking at least 800 substitute teachers and day care workers for shifts ranging from one classroom period to the entire day. They were also asking state bureaucrats to volunteer to serve. (Associated Press News, 2022)

During that same month, Governor Kevin Stitt of Oklahoma signed an executive order allowing state workers to volunteer as substitute teachers to help with the state’s teacher shortage. After the announcement, a memo went out to thousands of state employees with a link where they could apply to help in schools. Each district would be responsible for conducting background checks before volunteers could enter the classrooms. (2 News Oklahoma, 2022)

1. Why Are There So Few Substitute Teachers?

There are many reasons why the substitute teacher pool has dwindled over the years. If there was one direct cause, a precise corrective measure could be implemented to alleviate the problem. With the onslaught of COVID, Frontline Education researched this issue and found some of the most commonly cited reasons for the shortage to be:

- COVID-related concerns may prevent substitutes, many of whom are older, from wanting to return to school buildings.
- Low pay and a lack of benefits (e.g. health insurance) dissuades qualified people from substitute teaching, especially as wages rise in other sectors and competition for workers increases as many industries face staffing shortages.
- Substitute teaching is not seen as a prestigious profession.
- Teacher shortages make it easier for out-of-work educators to find full-time positions.
- State and local laws may make it difficult or impossible for retired teachers to work as substitutes while still collecting retirement benefits.
- Fewer new teachers graduating from teacher prep programs limits the pool of newly-minted educators who work as substitutes before finding full-time teaching work.

On more localized levels, their research suggested the following:

- Substitutes may prefer to work in certain buildings, and avoid others, based on school culture and whether or not they feel welcomed.
- Certain schools may be closer to where substitutes live.
- Some school cultures may have a more laissez-faire approach to absenteeism, leading to relatively more absences that need to be filled.
- Teachers in a particular school may be more conscientious about reporting absences in advance and including thorough lesson plans, helping substitutes feel better prepared for the day. (Frontline Education, 2022).

2. Urban Districts Have Even More Barriers

Recent research provides a rationale regarding the substitute teacher shortage in general. However, for school districts described as urban, disadvantaged, or having majority students-of-color populations, the shortages and challenges are even greater. Liu, et al, (2020) completed a study covering the school years 2011-12 to 2017-18 on the prevalence of the substitute teacher shortage, how it varies across districts, and what factors determine the

distribution. The study included surveys to both regular teachers and substitute teachers to gauge their perceptions of substitute teaching.

Among the most striking, yet unsurprising conclusions, the study found that disadvantaged schools exhibits systematically lower substitute coverage rates than other schools. Although the study was limited to the west coast of the United States, it showed schools in the lowest achievement quartile with the highest shares of minorities and lower-income districts had between 0.9 – 1.3 more non-covered annual absences per teacher than did schools in the most advantaged categories. In more concrete terms, disadvantaged schools with at least 50 teachers are expected to have 65 – 80 non-covered absences annually, compared to 16 – 33 non-covered absences in an advantaged school of the same size. Regarding teacher expectations, their data found that teachers in high needs schools were much more likely to expect non-covered absences than their peers in others schools. Nearly half of teachers in schools with predominately Black and Hispanic students reported that their schools are not able or probably not able to find a substitute teacher when they are absent.

When inquiring of substitute teachers about their “least preferred” schools at which to work, a number of categories were identified. However, among the most prominent were 1) middle schools that have significantly lower average achievement, 2) a higher concentration of Black and Hispanic students with higher suspension rates, and 3) student behavior was an important factor in their designations of certain schools as least preferable to substitute.

3. Exploring Plans for Improvement

The substitute teacher shortage has been years in the making. Perhaps school districts of all demographics have taken this segment of the workforce for granted and assumed there would always an adult with at least minimum qualifications to provide short-term class coverage. Recent events have demonstrated that this segment of the workforce should no longer be treated as an afterthought, but rather, as an essential component of the education community. While high quality instruction from state licensed teachers must be the priority for all schools, districts must now invest and put into action plans that will deliver the best alternatives when those teachers are not available. The districts that will be most successful in this endeavor will think and plan beyond the ideas of “short-term class coverage” to the more optimal notion of “short-term continued learning” for students.

Developing a qualified and reliable contingent of substitute teachers will take time, commitment, resources, and strategic planning. Although each district should explore every viable pathway within their unique communities, we believe the most productive outcomes will be found within an organized framework for improvement.

4. Improve Overall Teacher Attendance

The most efficient way to address the shortage of substitute teachers is to not need them as frequently. The National Council on Teacher Quality (2014) sampled districts from across the United States regarding teacher attendance incentives. A number of strategies emerged that may be practical and useful in some districts while less effective in others.

- *Payment for unused sick leave at retirement:* Districts that used this plan typically paid teachers for anywhere from 25% - 100% of their unused days. Other districts offered to pay teachers for everyday in excess of 45 sick days.
- *Payment for unused sick leave at the end of each school year:* Nine districts around the country provided the option of receiving some payment and the end of the year.
- *Reward excellent attendance with additional compensation:* One district pays teachers with unused sick leave up to \$1,500 through available funds in its substitute teacher budget.
- *Restrict leave at specific times of the year:* These districts have policies to restrict leave on particular days of the year.
- *Require medical certification for sick leave:* Some districts require teachers to provide medical evidence after their absences.
- *Include teacher attendance as a measure in teacher evaluations:* This measure is incorporated most often in the broader evaluation describing professionalism of the teacher. (NCTQ, 2014).

5. Increase the Pool of Substitute Teacher Applicants

Selecting and maintaining the highest quality candidates begins by increasing the overall number of applicants. Given the highly competitive employment environment, the position must become more financially attractive while sustained recruitment efforts are initiated. Although some districts may have to continue to operate in the “substitute

crisis mode” in the immediate, over time, the candidate pool will improve and a qualified and reliable core of substitute teachers will become identified and available. A solicitation of suggestions from northeast Ohio school districts resulted in the following recommendations.

- *Offer the highest sustainable payment:* Substitute teacher daily payment varies greatly from state-to-state, and even district-to-district. While most applicants will be realistic with their expectations, districts can only attract strong candidates with at least respectful and locally competitive offers.
- *Offer bonus pay for continuity and reliability:* Incremental increases in daily pay should be made at specified numbers of days worked. This strategy may incentivize substitutes to prioritize work in your district when other options are available.
- *Advertise using both traditional and nontraditional methods:* The district website, as well as each building website should have a link which invites prospective substitutes to apply for employment. Make sure that substitute employment opportunities are posted on job search engines such as Indeed. On an intermittent basis, use school marquee to remind community members of potential employment. Make use of temporary employment agencies. Have postings and/or make announcements at regular school functions such as Open House, parent conference nights, student awards ceremonies, and graduations.
- *Targeted recruitment:* Ask every employee within the district for recommendations. Their personal knowledge of individuals may shorten the time to find qualified candidates, as well as those who may be the best fit for culture of the district. You may also want to equip each employee with cards for distribution containing the appropriate email address and phone number to the Human Resources office.
- *Use flexible standards until the supply is strengthened:* Substitute teacher requirements vary from state-to-state, and school districts have varying requirements as well. Some states do not regulate substitute teachers at all and leave it up to the individual school district to determine the requirements. In many states such as Ohio, substitutes have been required to have a minimum of a Bachelor’s Degree in order to qualify for the position. However in October 2021 due to the recent shortage and dire need of substitutes, the Ohio Legislature passed Senate Bill 1 which dropped the degree requirement for the remainder of the 2021-22 academic year. It will remain up to individual districts to decide if they want to require any post-secondary education to work as a substitute. All applicants will still be subject to background checks and must pass drug testing.

6. Provide Orientation, Induction, Mentoring, and Ongoing Professional Development

As substitute teachers become a more integral part of the educational community, school districts should consider providing four distinct levels of support. Support in these areas should not come at great financial costs to the district, but would require planning, attention, and management from school leadership. Incorporating these levels of support for the substitutes will result in a community of employees that feel more valued and appreciated, as well as better prepared for their responsibilities and more committed to the long-term success of the schools. The four specific areas include 1) orientation, 2) induction, 3) mentoring, and 4) ongoing professional development. These areas have been modified from the generally accepted frameworks for successful classroom teaching.

- *Orientation:* This step should be completed before substitutes are permitted to begin employment. Ideally this would be an in-person event for participants and presenters; however, high quality complete online and virtual sessions can be developed. The orientation can be accomplished in a half-day session, but should provide participants with additional important independent reading. The highlights of the orientation should include an overview of the community and school district demographics. The district’s philosophies, missions, and goals should be clearly stated. Fundamental areas of school law such as negligence, liability, ethics, and mandated reporting should be addressed. Finally, district-wide emergency and school security policies and procedures, as well as an introduction to basic first-aid should be included.
- *Induction:* This step may also begin with an additional in-person half-day session, but will be incorporated into the first few days of actual paid employment. The induction phase provides substitutes with protocols, standards, procedures, and strategies for managing individual classrooms and student behavior.
- *Mentoring:* Substitute teacher mentoring is a process rather than an event. The length of this phase is highly individualized, but should last until the district determines that the substitute is confident, competent, and capable in carrying out their responsibilities. The mentor may be a veteran substitute teacher, a single experienced teacher, or multiple qualified participants within the school or district. The mentor(s) will offer practical wisdom to the substitute during planned or informal sessions on teaching and learning, students,

parents, and the school. These sessions will also be an opportunity for the substitute to obtain advice regarding unique situations or even offer their ideas about how substitute teaching could be improved in general.

- *Ongoing professional development:* Oftentimes school districts struggle to provide high-quality professional development for their regular teaching force. In those cases, professional development for substitutes becomes a distant afterthought. However, if school districts are committed to having a strong contingent of substitute teachers, at least a minimum amount of planning should be considered. Depending upon costs and circumstances, districts could choose between two avenues for the professional development of substitute teachers: A) when possible include substitutes along with regular teachers in school and districts sessions, or B) plan separate sessions focusing more on the specific needs and interests of substitute teachers. In either event, the sessions should be based on a framework for effectiveness as identified by the Learning Policy Institute (2017) which includes the following seven elements for success: 1) focused content, 2) incorporates active learning, 3) supports collaboration, 4) uses models of effective practice, 5) provides coaching and expert support, 6) offers feedback and reflection, and 7) is of sustained duration.

7. Summary

Historically, many school districts have been slow to embrace, if not even resistant to change. Change is not necessary just for the sake of doing things differently, but change in response to a changing world is demanded of education leaders. COVID 19 caught us all off guard and highlighted many school technological shortcomings and the lack of foresight in regards to staffing needs. With this in mind, there is little reason to believe that there will be a return to what were once defined as normal school days.

No one can state with certainty what the lingering effects of the global pandemic will be on the overall workforce, nor should we anticipate that those most capable of fulfilling substitute teacher roles will suddenly be inspired to come forth out of their own volition. What is known however is that when regular classroom teachers are unavailable, students' need for learning does not pause. Some school districts have demonstrated better levels of preparation than others in staffing substitute teachers. Unfortunately in districts where students have traditionally exhibited the lowest academic achievement and highest need for improved instruction, qualified and reliable substitute teacher positions may remain among the most difficult to fill.

While this paper broadly addresses the lack of available and high quality substitute teachers, there is much room for ongoing research along narrower dimensions. It would be useful to school districts to examine data on the availability of substitute teachers by grade levels and content areas, as well as by public, private, charter, and religious school settings. This additional knowledge would greatly aid in designing recruitment and retention efforts to fit the needs of specific communities.

Regardless of school district demographics or historical student achievement, with planning and commitment, a more capable and reliable contingent of substitute teachers can be developed and available as needed. School districts that are dedicated to providing students with their best opportunities for sustained learning will have on-hand those temporary, but strong bridges referred to as substitute teachers. Every student deserves to have highly trained and professional teachers throughout their school years, but on the days when those teachers are not available, there is no substitute for a good substitute teacher.

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