

# **A Time of Opportunity with Increased Numbers of Substitute Teachers**

*By Geoffrey G. Smith*

In recent years a number of publications have pinpointed a robust American economy as a major reason for creating a shortage in substitute teachers (Smith, 1999). However, recently, school districts report an increased number of substitute teacher applicants this year for the first time in many years. A number of potential reasons have been cited for the increased number of substitute applicants, including a downturn in the economy, providing training for substitute teachers, increased pay, and better technology for the application process.

## **The Economy and Increased Number of Substitute Teachers**

The Substitute Teaching Institute at Utah State University (STI/USU), established in 1995, has received reports of shortages worsening each year until the current school year. With the recent downturn in the economy, it is likely that substitute teachers are becoming more readily available as employees are laid off or finding difficulty finding attractive jobs. Consider the following recent announcements of layoffs by major American employers:

<b>Employer</b>	<b>Number of Layoffs</b>
Gateway	15,000
Motorola	32,000
Hewlett-Packard	6,000
Delta	12,000
Ford	5,000
Nortel	30,000
Toshiba	19,000
Hitachi	14,000
Autoliv	955
lomega	560

<http://www.wsj.com/public/resources/documents/dotcomlayoffs.htm>

Recently STI/USU conducted an informal survey of 25 school districts around the United States to see how school districts perceived how the economy was affecting the number of substitute teachers in their pools and the number of new substitute teacher applicants. With just a couple of exceptions, each school district reported an increase in substitute teacher applicants this year, with some districts reporting twice as many applicants as in previous years. Most attribute this rise in applicants to economic conditions, though citing other explanations as increased training, increased pay, and the availability of more convenient application procedures such as Internet applications.

Here are some examples of comments we heard from districts around the United States when asked if the economy was a factor in the increased number of substitute applicants:

*We have had an increase in substitute applicants. I would have to agree that the economy would be the most significant reason.*

—Texas

*I cannot with certainty attribute it [the increased number of substitute teachers] to the economy, nor should you as a researcher assume that you can generalize from the local employment trends to the national economic situation, HOWEVER, we have had nearly double the number of substitute teacher applicants this year than in previous years. Other possible contributing factors which you would have to account for are increases in substitute salaries from last year to this—which we have also had.*

—Texas

*Absolutely it [the economy] has [increased the number of substitute teacher applicants]...for the better. I am swamped with qualified, eager applicants right now. Much more so than last year, though I feel terrible for them working for \$86/day with a BA/BS/MA!*

—California

*It is a sad irony that we can only pick up more people interested in working with children when they have fewer places to work. Having said that, I will*

*take them regardless of the reason. I directly interview all of our substitute prospects and the sagging economy appears to be a common theme among an increasing portion of applicants.*

—Ohio

*We have seen a greater number of applicants this September than last. However, it may also be due to the fact that we had substitute training, increased our rates, and the word is out.*

—New Jersey

*I do believe that we are seeing an increase in the number of substitute teacher applications because of the slow down on the economic front. We learned this morning that Delta Airlines, the largest employer in the region, is laying off some 12,000 workers. I'm sure other layoffs will follow.*

*I've compiled some interesting statistics comparing September 2000 and September 2001.*

	<b># of Subs</b>	<b>Absences</b>	<b>Unfilled</b>
Sept 2000	927	6019	473
Sept 2001	1188	6022	88

*This is a strange business and the old adage of "feast or famine" certainly applies!*

—Georgia

*We are swamped with applicants and new hires! It started in August and continues. We started the school year with more substitutes in the pool than ever before: almost 6,000. The soft economy has helped us bring many more young people into the substitute pool. We are hoping that some of them become regular teachers! Grow our own!*

—Illinois

*Starting last November and December, we have had an increase in our substitute pool. When "polling" our substitutes, I found that a large number of them were there because of downsizing, recent graduations but not finding jobs...This has continued and probably will with the most recent tragedy.*

—Florida

*During [training] workshops I ask my participants to introduce themselves and tell why they are getting into substitute teaching. I have had a few say it is because they are laid off work, but then they quickly follow up that they began a teaching degree sometime previous and maybe they think they want to pursue it again...and this is their opportunity to see if they want to continue.*

—Kentucky

*Our district has over 2,000 active substitute teachers, and we had a backlog of over 700 applications to review prior to the events on September 11.*

*I do anticipate seeing an increase in applicants since some of the area's largest employers (such as Disney) may not have enough work for their hourly staff. A good example is an applicant who walked in last week. This young woman is close to having a degree in education and has worked for Disney in an hourly capacity for a few years. Because she isn't getting enough hours, she thought of substitute teaching.*

*There may be another reason for the increase. We now have an electronic application system where a candidate completes his/her application for teaching or substitute teaching over the Web. In July and August, we saw a 10 percent increase in applications over last year.*

—Florida

*I do believe the downturn in the economy has, and will, increase the number applying to be substitutes. Truthfully, though, there is no way for me to track that as we do not have the statistics from last year to compare with.*

—Colorado

*We haven't had any great increase in those that are willing to substitute.*

—Ohio

*Absolutely, last year we were “beating the bushes” looking for substitutes. Now I am having interview fairs so that I may hire them quickly.*

—Kansas

*I would say the downturn in the economy plays a major factor in the increased amount of substitutes we have seen this year. Another reason could be the increase in the number of substitutes graduating with degrees in political science and psychology. There doesn't seem to be a great demand for graduates in those areas.*

—Ohio

Based on the results of this informal survey, there is good reason to believe that an increase in substitute teacher applicants is occurring. While many school districts attribute this to the economy, there may be a number of other explanations such as increased training, increased pay, and use of new technologies in the recruiting and hiring process.

This change in the number of applications to substitute teach has brought an opportunity that was viewed as a luxury in the past. Many districts were reluctant to require training for substitute teachers for fear of turning potential substitutes away. This fear, however, did hold up with a district that went ahead and required training for employment (Minthorne, 2000). An increase of applications was experienced when training was required. Individuals who had always been interested in education found it attractive when they knew they would be properly trained.

With current conditions, districts may now require training without the fear of falling below the quantity of substitute teachers needed to fill most daily needs. Training in these cases can be at the investment of the school, district, or substitute teacher.

By requiring training, districts can insure an increase in the competency of their substitute pool as well as receive the benefits associated with training. These benefits include reduced complaints registered against substitute teachers and higher retention rates (Minthorne, 2000).

Districts require individuals applying for most certificated and non-certificated positions to be trained; it only makes sense to require substitutes to be trained prior to being hired to replace the permanent teacher. There has never been a greater opportunity to train substitute teachers than during the economic condition facing the country today.

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**References**

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