

## **Money Has Not Solved the Problem- Personalizing Policies to Attain and Retain Substitute Teachers**

*By Blaine L. Sorenson*

**T**he shortage of substitute teachers continues to plague school districts around the country. This shortage has become so severe that many states are eliminating many of the qualifications for teacher certification; currently 28 states allow a person to become a substitute teacher with a high school diploma. Only one state, Iowa, still requires a permanent teacher credential (Jones, 1999).

### **Pay vs. Policy**

Many districts see the solution to this dilemma as strictly an issue of pay and have embarked on a policy or program of increasing the daily pay a substitute teacher receives. The question is: How successful has this approach been to solving the substitute teacher shortage? While increasing substitute teacher pay has helped, it has not been a permanent solution to the substitute teacher shortage. Some districts, such as Denver Public Schools in Colorado, have been successful by offering more money a day than surrounding school districts. Denver's pay rate of \$111 beats surrounding districts, including Jefferson County, Douglas County, and Cherry Creek where substitutes make \$80 per day. Other school districts have embarked on different pay incentives to entice substitute teachers such as increasing pay after a substitute has worked a certain number of days during any one school year (Ednalino, 2001).

The policy of respect has proven more effective. When neighboring school districts offer the same pay rate to the substitute teacher, pay has not been proven to be a recruitment or retention factor. One school district in Michigan reported that when several substitutes received rude treatment by office personnel in a neighboring school district they went elsewhere. Several of these substitutes came to this district and turned out to be highly effective and frequently employed substitute teachers (Everett, personal communication, Jan. 26, 2001). Other school districts have also reported that "The highest impact we have found with our district is how well our substitute teachers are treated and trained" (Payne, personal communication, Jan. 24, 2001). A school district in the State of Washington (identified as the second largest in the state) has paid substitute teachers the highest rate among neighboring school districts. It has found a higher rate of pay has not increased the number of substitute teachers willing to work in their district (K12AdminListServe, personal communication, 2001).

## **Best Policies to Attain and Retain Substitute Teachers**

Perhaps to better understand what practices will successfully recruit and retain substitute teachers one needs to be reminded of what people want from their work. In a survey conducted by Kenneth Korvach, employee ranking and supervisor ranking of job factors are different (1980). For example, on a scale of 1 to 10, employees ranked “full appreciation of work done” as #2 while supervisors ranked this as #8 and while supervisors ranked “good wages” as #1 employees viewed this as a #5. Clearly, supervisors and employees have different perceptions of what contributes to job satisfaction. Not much has changed over the past 20 years. Research conducted by the Substitute Teaching Institute at Utah State University (2000) reveals that the number one reason substitute teachers leave is NOT PAY. If not pay, then what are the factors affecting the recruitment and retention of substitute teachers? Research has validated that the number one reason substitutes are leaving is due to the way they are treated and the number two reason is their inability to manage classroom behavior. The bottom line is, school officials need to change their thinking and attitudes on what recruits and retains substitute teachers.

If the number of substitute teachers available to work in the district’s schools is decreasing, it is essential to identify why they no longer are willing to work in the district before taking corrective actions. This is precisely what Dr. Ray Timothy (2000), current Superintendent of the Millard County Schools in Delta, Utah, determined when he was a site principal. The school district’s coordinator of substitute teachers revealed that every day, fewer and fewer substitutes were choosing to return to his school and was concerned that the school would exhaust its supply of substitute teachers before the school year was over.

Dr. Timothy reported this concern to the school faculty. The teachers were at a loss to explain why substitute teachers were not interested in returning to their school. After all, the teachers said they left detailed lesson plans and expressed clear expectations to students about appropriate behavior during their absence. The policies were clearly not working in attaining and retaining substitute teachers; an element must be missing.

Dr. Timothy carried his investigation directly to the source—the substitute teachers. At first, they were reluctant to share why they no longer wished to work at his site, but he persisted in his questioning. The reasons for their reluctance soon became evident. The substitute teacher’s comments included:

“I was not welcomed to the school when I reported to the office.”

“The classrooms were always locked.”

“The teaching staff and administration failed to observe my teaching during the school day.”

“I ate by myself in the staff lunchroom.”

“In checking out at the end of the day I was never told if my services would be needed again.”

In effect, the substitute teacher was treated as a non-person! The school’s practices were wrong.

Concerned about the implications, Dr. Timothy set about to make the school more substitute teacher friendly. Room keys were made available to substitute teachers. Other staff personnel made a point to visit with and welcome each substitute teacher. Substitute teachers were invited to eat with other staff members during lunch. Substitute teachers were thanked for their services at the end of their assignment. These small but significant changes were obviously important to the substitute teacher. By addressing their concerns and implementing modest changes in practices and policies, Dr. Timothy was able to change the substitute teachers’ attitudes about working at the school, and the retention rate of substitute teachers increased. Relationships, appreciation, and treatment as a staff professional are clearly valued by substitute teachers.

More and more educators, like Dr. Timothy, are coming to realize that schools can and should do more to make the school environment more accommodating to their substitute teaching staff. Gestures as simple as showing them the location of the staff restrooms, the cafeteria or lunchroom, where they can get a cup of coffee, and inviting them to participate in the coffee fund all show acceptance as a staff member. Substitute teachers need to feel that they are an integral part of the school community” (Wilson, 1999).

Dorothy Clore (2000), a substitute teacher in grades 6-12 in Michigan, echoed this sentiment. Ms. Clore described what happens when substitute teachers receive little or no recognition and appreciation. “It is in the teachers’ lounges where public relations with subs could be improved,” she said. “Initially I went into the lounges at lunchtime thinking I could meet some of the staff members. But I was greeted with such indifference that I don’t even bother going in there any more.”

Many school districts have begun the practice of assigning mentor teachers at each school to ensure the substitute teacher has someone to assist him or her during the school day. This individual checks in with the substitute teacher to see how things are going and offers accompaniment to the staff lounge or cafeteria during lunchtime.

Research conducted by the Substitute Teaching Institute at Utah State University indicates that substitute teachers don’t perform well in school settings where they are made to feel unwelcome and uncomfortable (STI/USU, 2000). Because substitute teachers feel unwelcome and uncomfortable in the school setting they view themselves as lacking the skills necessary to be successful in the classroom.

Every staff member plays a part in making the teaching experience at the site both rewarding and meaningful for the substitute teacher. Districts that are experiencing success in recruiting and retaining substitute teachers are implementing substitute-friendly practices.

**Recommended Practices:**

- *Make sure the principal and office staff greet the substitute teacher at the beginning of the school day.* A common complaint voiced by substitutes is no one greets them and they wait several minutes before being helped. Obviously there is not time to welcome substitute teachers as the school bell rings, so substitutes should be encouraged to arrive as early as 20 minutes before their assignment begins. Topics for discussion include a building orientation, an introduction to colleagues within grade level or department, help in locating necessary teaching materials and forms, reviewing attendance and disciplinary procedures, and answering any questions or concerns. Getting off to a smooth start goes a long way in making the teaching day meaningful for the substitute teacher. Additionally, as the substitute teacher gains experience at the school, the amount of assistance needed decreases.
- *Visit the substitute teacher in the classroom during the school day.* Another complaint made by substitute teachers is that no one checks on them during their assignment at the site. This is an excellent opportunity to evaluate what is happening in the classroom. Many substitute teachers are seeking permanent employment in the district as a regular teacher. This provides the school administration the opportunity to see the substitute teacher in the classroom setting, observe their classroom management skills, and assess the teaching strategies being implemented. Treat substitute teachers the same way you treat the school staff, as a professional member of the teaching staff. This attitude shows your respect for substitute teachers, and also shows students how you expect them to treat substitute teachers.
- *Conduct a brief exit interview with the substitute teacher as he or she leaves at the end of the teaching day and ask all substitute teachers to complete a short report about their experiences.* Taking time to conduct an exit interview communicates to the substitute teacher that the school cares when the classroom teacher is not in the classroom and keeps open the lines of communication. Ask the substitute teacher for feedback on the days assignment:
  - Were you able to locate the classroom teachers lesson plan?
  - Were you able to implement the lesson plan?
  - Did you receive assistance in a timely manner?
  - Are there student discipline issues that need to be addressed?
  - Were you able to find everything necessary to make the day a teaching success?

Let the substitute teacher know if their services will be required the next day. Use the exit interview as an opportunity to remedy any problems the school staff observed in the substitute teachers being prepared and professional.

- *Make sure classroom teachers prepare their students for the visit of the substitute teacher and provide materials necessary to carry out the lesson plan.* Because every classroom teacher has his or her own procedures, it is vital that each teacher prepares a folder for the substitute teacher. A narrative telling what students are expected to complete is vital. Students who have permission to leave the room for remedial or medical reasons should be included when listing students with special needs. Most substitute teachers would prefer ‘too much direction’ rather than ‘not enough’. Make sure the substitute teacher has access to the materials needed to carry out the lesson plan; locked up materials or broken audiovisual equipment can quickly sabotage a lesson delivery. A lesson plan is valuable only if it can be followed and is flexible.
- *Provide skills training and positive feedback to the substitute teacher.* Invite substitute teachers to participate in in-service programs that build upon their skills as a classroom teacher. If possible, offer district workshops on classroom management, legal/educational issues, and teaching strategies. Substitutes may also be invited to attend orientation sessions conducted for new faculty members at the beginning of each school year.
- *Include substitute teachers in social groups in staff lounges or lunchrooms.* This can be easily accomplished if a “buddy system” has been established or is in place. The assignment to mentor a substitute teacher during the school day can be shared by all members of the teaching staff on a rotating basis. Substitute teachers appreciate it when they know there is someone they can rely upon to assist them during the school day.
- *Announce “guest” teachers over the public address system and recognize long-term or frequent service at a school board meeting.* These may seem trivial but “you’ll catch more flies with honey than you will with vinegar.”
- *Grant substitute teachers free access to district and school events.* This provides students, parents and staff the opportunity to see substitute teachers as supportive of the educational (both academic and activity) programs of the district.
- *Provide preferential parking.* Reserve parking that is convenient. A legitimate concern of substitutes is their safety and welfare.
- *Assign “Student Ambassadors.”* Assign students to assist and welcome substitutes to the school setting. These students can welcome the substitute teacher to the school, help them locate the lunchroom and staff lounge, and render other assistance as necessary during the school day. Students from the student

leadership class can be assigned this responsibility but a sample of the student population in general is recommended.

- *Invite substitute teachers to staff socials and celebrations.* When the school site receives public recognition or plans after school get-togethers socials include your substitutes in these happenings. To be included in the school social environment builds that important sense of comradeship.
- *Include substitute teachers in the beginning of the school year meetings and end of the school year functions.* Recognize your substitute teachers for the efforts they make to educate your students. They feel valued when they are able to celebrate in the successes of the schools in which they serve.

These practices will go a long way in establishing a positive tone for the substitute teacher. In the words of Karen Wilson (1999) in *Working with Substitute Teachers* “substitutes may still not think they make enough money, but few will complain if they’re happy with the job.”

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