

Recruiting and Retaining Substitute Teachers

By Peter W. Cardon

In the past few years an increasing array of material – empirical research as well as expert conclusions and recommendations – regarding substitute teaching has become available. This article will briefly examine several key findings related to recruiting and retaining of substitute teachers based on current literature. The paper will conclude with suggestions for future research in this area.

Half of school districts in the United States report that there are never enough or usually not enough substitute teachers (National Education Association [NEA], 2001). An insufficient number of substitute teachers is a function of how many substitutes enter the pool as opposed to how many are leaving the substitute teaching pool – problems addressed by recruiting and retaining.

Effective Practices in Recruiting and Retaining Substitute Teachers

The current research on substitute teaching suggests several key findings relating to recruiting and retaining substitute teachers. First, training is the most effective method of attracting and keeping substitute teachers. Second, active hiring practices give school districts a better opportunity to select the best available educators as substitute teachers. Third, school districts must be competitive with neighboring districts to attract and keep substitute teachers. Finally, school districts that meet the long-term needs of substitute teachers are more effective at attracting and keeping substitute teachers.

Training as a Recruiting Tool

Research has shown that the most effective means of attracting and keeping substitutes is to provide training (Smith, 1999). Training substitute teachers attracts more substitutes and keeps them active for longer because it relieves substitute teachers from anxiety over lack of basic teaching competencies and meets the majority of their primary expectations of being a substitute teacher. Also, training improves substitute teacher quality, which increases confidence and success in the classroom. This success and confidence encourages individuals to continue doing a job that they enjoy.

The most significant concern of substitute teachers is classroom management. Training can quickly give substitute teachers the tools and know-how to avoid or eliminate 94% of inappropriate classroom behaviors. Moreover, training allows substitute teachers to develop competence in various teaching strategies as well as provide them with

supplementary materials such as fill-in activities to make classrooms run smoothly and effectively. Competencies in classroom management and teaching strategies as well as an ample store of fill-in activities can drastically reduce the anxiety of substitute teachers and create a more satisfying experience (Smith, Murdock, Jones, Goldenhersh, & Latham, 2000).

Additionally, training meets many of the primary expectations of substitute teachers. Several studies examining the expectations of substitute teachers have shown that the primary expectations of substitute teachers include contributing to the needs of students, positioning for future employment, being treated as professional members of school communities, gaining new experiences, and having flexible work schedules (O'Malley, 2000; Abdal-Haqq, 1997; Jones, 2000). Training meets each of these primary needs by helping substitute teachers more effectively influence student achievement, improving teaching skills that are requisite for professional advancement, recognizing them as valuable members of the school communities they serve, and minimally disrupting their normal schedules.

Professional development, or in-service training, is rarely offered to substitute teachers yet prescribed by an increasing number of substitute teaching specialists. Professional development legitimizes substitute teachers as insiders in the school community and provides valued recognition of the role they play in teaching students (Jones, 2000; Abdal-Haqq, 1997).

The experience of the Hillsborough County school district in Florida has shown very interesting results over the past few years relating to training and how training affects recruiting and retaining substitute teachers. Beginning in 1997, Hillsborough County began implementing training programs for its substitute teachers and carefully documented the observed results. Most importantly, teacher quality improved within two years of implementation, complaints against substitute teachers having been reduced in half. Moreover, the number of applicants had risen, and substitute teacher longevity had increased (Smith, 1999). These results are similar to those of the St. Clair County School District in Ohio, which increased its substitute teaching pool by 175 teachers after implementing training. Their primary finding was that training was the key to increasing the substitute teaching pool, not increasing pay or lowering minimum qualifications (University of Dayton, 1998).

Another interesting finding of the implementation of training in Hillsborough County, Florida, was that training can compensate quite adequately for the need to lower minimum qualifications for potential substitute teachers. The district had decided to provide a 3-day training program for new substitute teachers who had completed more than 60 credits of college. A 10-day training program was provided for those with only high school diplomas and no college. Those who had the 10-day training program had half as many unsatisfactory teaching reports as those who had the 3-day training program. It was concluded that the

extra training was more valuable than the additional college experience. This may have important implications for setting minimum qualifications for recruitment and providing training for new substitutes (Minthorn, 2000).

Training, therefore, is the most effective method of managing a quality substitute teaching pool that sufficiently meets the demands created by teacher absenteeism. Training alleviates substitute teacher concerns over inadequacies in the classroom and meets their primary expectations of substitute teaching. It also improves substitute teacher quality, which leads to higher job satisfaction.

Active Hiring Practices

In general, recruitment practices of substitute teachers throughout the United States are passive, relying most heavily on individuals applying on their own. Approximately 80% of school districts depend heavily on this method to attract substitute teachers. Word-of-mouth is the next most used method of attracting subs, with between 50% and 60% of school districts using this method (Dorward, Smith, & Jones, 1999; Griswold & Hughes, 2000). Moreover, less than half of school districts surveyed hold personal interviews (43.9%) or check applicants' references (49.7%) – also showing a quite casual approach to hiring (Dorward, Hawkins, & Smith, 2000).

More active approaches to hiring substitute teachers provide higher quality substitute teachers while also enhancing the stability of substitute teaching pools. School districts should profile the type of substitute teachers that would be best in classrooms. In particular, three groups are targeted as potential substitute teachers: educators, members of community service groups, and parents – each group having substantial commitment to education. Educators include teachers seeking full-time employment; college students in education-related fields; and former teachers. Members of community service groups may be from volunteer groups such as Kiwanis Club, Rotary Club, or church groups. Members of community service groups may also be from professional groups such as fire departments or police stations. Parents may be an especially useful resource since they feel invested in the quality of their children's school experience (Jones, 2000).

School districts can be very creative in how they reach prospective substitute teachers. Avenues of reaching these target substitutes include local advertisements, temporary placement offices, school newsletters, flyers or notes to parents, and PTA organizations (Jones, 2000). Notably, private placement offices such as Kelly Services have contracted to entirely perform the hiring and placement of substitute teachers for some school districts. Each day, Kelly Services places approximately 1,600 substitutes in classrooms throughout the United States. Other private hiring services include OPIS, Educational Staffing Solutions, Source 4 Teachers, Substitute Teaching Service, Holland Employment, and Education Placement Services (Kim, 2001).

School districts that use active hiring practices are better able to attract quality substitute teachers than those using passive approaches. Once identified, targeted groups should be contacted via personal invitations, newsletters, talks or speeches, and letters. Announce training during these recruiting sessions to increase participant response.

Competing with Neighboring School Districts

Frequently, school districts compete with neighboring districts for substitute teachers. Substitute teachers often choose among school districts and even between schools within school districts based on pay, notification procedure, professional treatment, and support provided during the employment period. Effective school districts ensure that they are competitive with surrounding school districts in recruiting and retaining substitute teachers by implementing innovative practices.

While pay is generally not the primary concern for potential substitute teachers, minimal increases in compensation that more closely align a school district with other neighboring districts can have a substantial impact on attracting potential substitute teachers. In 1999 the St. Charles School District in Missouri found that its substitute teaching pool of 185 substitutes was inadequate to meet its needs. By raising the per diem pay rate from \$58 to \$68, the district increased its pool by nearly 70% to 309 substitutes – an amount sufficient to meet its needs. While the \$10 increase was fairly modest, it brought the school district into a much more competitive position relative to its neighboring school district, Pattonville District, which was paying its substitute teachers \$75 per diem (Sultan, 1999).

One of the primary reasons for utilizing newer notification technologies is to compete with other neighboring school districts in order to notify and efficiently commit substitute teachers before neighboring school districts do. Advanced notification technologies, such as AESOP, CRS, Samfox, and eSchool Solutions, should be utilized not only to increase efficiency but also to compete with surrounding school districts (Bernasconi, 2000).

An essential part of attracting and retaining substitute teachers is being competitive with neighboring school districts at a district level and competitive with neighboring schools within a school district on a more local level. Substitute managers should ensure that their school districts and the schools within those districts compete favorably based on pay, timeliness of notification, and treatment.

Strategically Matching Long-term Needs

School districts that strategically match long-term needs of substitute teachers and those of the school district are more effective at attracting and keeping substitute teachers. Generally speaking, meeting the long-term needs of substitute teachers create larger, more manageable, and more stable substitute teaching pools. Long-term financial incentives

and organizational alliances are examples of strategies with long-term outlooks. Substitutes can be hired in advance for every day of the school year, or be designated to serve only at a specific site as needed. These substitutes are commonly referred to as permanent substitutes or site substitutes. In most cases, long-term substitutes, those who are replacing a permanent teacher for more than two weeks, are paid at a higher rate due to labor contracts.

School districts that have financial incentives for long-term service create more stable and reliable substitute teaching pools. By building in long-term financial incentives, they also build in natural selection strategies that favor quality substitute teachers since substitute teachers will need to teach at a level where they will be the first ones reselected for future days of substitute teaching. The following financial incentive structures are just a few examples currently being utilized:

- In several Ohio school districts, per diem pay of \$60 rises to \$75 after 10 consecutive days of substituting.
- In Washington, some school districts issue a \$200 bonus after 20 days worked in a particular district.
- In some Pennsylvania school districts, per diem pay increases from \$60 to \$75 after 30 days of substituting in particular district.
- In Ohio, some full-time teachers are paid hourly rates to substitute teach during preparation hours.
- In Massachusetts, some permanent substitutes are receiving the same benefit package as permanent teachers (NEA, 2001).

An especially innovative and effective example of matching long-term needs of substitute teachers with those of school districts is the “Town and Gown” project, which has been running in Fairfield, Connecticut, since the mid 1970’s. Essentially, this strategic alliance is a program that uses graduate students in the field of education from nearby universities as substitute teachers in exchange for the opportunity for graduate students to gain teaching experience and access to schools for their academic research projects. Students are reimbursed with stipends for a 90-day substitute teaching commitment. This type of graduate internship provides additional stability and predictability to current substitute teaching pools as well as providing a long-term flow of interns into the program (Burke, 2000).

Recommendations for Future Research

While research from the past several years has provided a good understanding of current approaches to recruiting and retaining substitute teachers, only a few studies have evaluated the effects of various strategies. The following types of research relating to recruiting and retaining substitute teachers would be especially useful in understanding effects: cost/benefit analyses, differential impacts of various strategies, and improved measures of substitute teacher quality.

Cost/Benefit Analyses

There is certainly a need for more research about how strategies for recruiting and retaining substitute teachers are justified in concrete terms – financially or otherwise. A few examples of questions that require a cost/benefit analysis include:

- How is an investment in an automated notification system more beneficial than costly to a school district?
- Is substitute teachers' paid inclusion in professional development sessions worth the investment?
- Do long-term financial incentives (i.e. increased pay after 30 days of substitute teaching) pay for themselves?
- Is it beneficial to pay retired teachers substantially more per diem?
- Does local advertising attract enough quality substitute teachers to be considered economically wise?

Burke's (2000) study of graduate internship programs, as discussed earlier in this paper, is an example of an article that analyzes a substitute teacher strategy in a form that concretely discusses costs and benefits. Detailed information about compensation for the graduate interns reveals that the daily costs for graduate interns are slightly higher than for regular substitute teachers. Burke then justifies the additional cost with a discussion of benefits not possible with regular substitute teachers. More cost/benefit analyses, such as Burke's study, would be of great value to personnel managers.

Differential Impacts of Various Strategies

In order to decide which strategies to implement and the amount of resources that should be devoted to particular strategies, it is quite important to know which strategies are most effective under given circumstances. A few examples of questions that depend on knowing the differential impacts of various strategies include?

- Does an equal investment in perks, such as health benefits, increase teacher retention more than that same investment in increased per diem pay rates?
- Should more investment be placed in local advertising or should a temporary hiring service be utilized to increase and manage the substitute teaching pool?
- Does targeting parents or community service groups provide a greater number of quality substitute teachers?
- Does increased training for substitute teachers increase the substitute teaching pool to a greater degree than lowering minimum substitute teacher qualifications?

Understanding the differential impacts of various recruiting and retention strategies is essential in making decisions that involve tradeoffs. Tradeoffs are ever constant in a world of limited budgets.

Improved Measures of Quality

Ultimately, the most critical concern is how substitute teaching affects the quality of students' education. By more precisely measuring the educational impacts on students, researchers can appropriately diagnose concerns and prescribe effective solutions to detrimental impacts.

- How much impact do trained substitute teachers have on student achievement?
- Do substitute teachers who have more teaching experience significantly improve the educational experience of students compared to substitute teachers with little classroom teaching experience?
- After receiving substitute teacher training, do substitute teachers with little or no college experience contribute effectively to students' academic performance?

Minthorn's (2000) study of the impact of training in Hillsborough County, Florida, over the past few years is an example of a study that measures quality. Minthorn measured substitute teacher quality based on the number of formal complaints against substitute teachers. More studies are needed to grasp the concept of quality in concrete terms.

Summary

The purpose of this paper has been to list several key findings concerning recruiting and retaining substitute teachers based on current literature. These key findings are that (a) training is the most effective method of attracting and keeping substitute teachers; (b) active hiring practices give school districts a better opportunity to select the best educators available as substitute teachers; (c) school districts must be competitive with neighboring districts in order to attract and keep substitute teachers; and (d) school districts that meet the long-term needs of substitute teachers are more effective at attracting and keeping substitute teachers. Several forms of research, which are not necessarily mutually exclusive, have been suggested for future study of recruiting and retaining substitute teachers, including cost/benefit analyses, differential impact studies, and quality studies.

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