

SubWays:

Ways to Track, Train, and Retain Quality Substitute Teachers

Kay D. Byers

Building, training and retaining a quality substitute teacher pool requires the collaborative effort and commitment of many people within the school district: classroom teachers, building administrators, substitute teachers, district administrators, and Board of Education members. There are no quick fixes for finding and keeping quality substitutes. Rather, there are incremental *WAYS* that collectively address the larger issue.

WAYS to Begin

Appoint a district administrator who is highly committed to guiding and supervising the substitute teacher program. This person is critical to program success. He or she will work daily with district and substitute staff to provide direction, plan and implement delivery, assess program needs and results, and communicate regularly with multiple audiences involved with the support of the substitute teaching area. This person should not only be capable of providing leadership, but should be able to identify and develop leadership capacities in others. The empowerment of others is crucial to cultivating personal investment and long-term commitment to the program.

- Provide competent and adequate support staff to manage clerical and logistical duties that are the underpinnings in the daily operations of providing substitutes for schools.
- Establish a substitute advisory group that meets regularly with the district administrator. Our substitute advisory group is called the Sub Caucus Committee. It is comprised of 12–20 substitutes that attend the Sub Caucus Committee meeting voluntarily once a month from August through June. This group has been a key component in the development of our substitute teacher program.
- Develop a systematic and on-going communication process with district/ building administrators, the Board of Education, teachers and substitute staff.

- Develop a yearly calendar/schedule of regular orientation sessions and staff development training sessions for substitutes.
- Develop a budget and budgetary process that acknowledges the importance of supporting the substitute teacher program. This is more than just higher pay for substitutes. This includes other provisions that create a professional working environment and recognition of the importance of substitutes to the daily learning environment of students.
- Make connections and develop a network of personnel that can assist and enhance the substitute teacher program with other sources of funding, materials, giveaways, or expert knowledge, abilities, and talents.

WAYS to Recruit Substitutes

Four years ago, we ended the year with 38,853 absences, 617 substitutes, and 2,432 unfilled absences. Last year we ended the year with 41,128 absences, 1,047 substitutes, and 688 unfilled absences. Having enough substitutes is a district wide need. Therefore, recruiting substitutes needs to be a district-wide concern. Building personnel are highly aware of the lack of substitutes when there are unfilled absences. The district administrator must stimulate an awareness of how and where building personnel can assist in recruiting potential substitutes. This is key to the gathering process.

These are *WAYS* to tap into a potential pool of substitutes:

- Advertise in:
 - Local or regional newspapers
 - School newsletters sent to parents and neighborhoods
 - *SubWays* – our district’s newsletter for substitutes
- Develop and maintain a district website with a specific link to the substitute teaching area:
 - Host or attend local and regional job and career fairs
 - Speak to or meet with:
 - Retired teacher organizations
 - Community and civic groups
 - Public functions
 - Board of Education meeting
 - AmeriCorps participants

- Work with local media to produce articles and television features about the need for substitutes:
- Develop/maintain a collaborative relationship with local colleges/universities
 - Use practicum students and student teachers as “emergency substitutes”
 - Get to know the new graduates – host receptions at district offices for soon-to-graduate students
 - Speak at college seminars, classes, and end of semester celebrations or portfolio presentations
 - Host luncheons for student and cooperating teachers
 - Speak at college faculty meetings
 - Facilitate district participation in America Reads and America Counts programs and speak to these groups
 - Hold emergency substitute orientations on college campuses
 - Advertise in college and university directories and newspapers
 - Advertise in education colleges’ publications and in their buildings and classrooms

WAYS to Track Substitute Teachers

Organizing and managing a database of all potential and current substitutes provides immediate and retrievable information for the district administrator. It is a highly valuable resource of specific information about individual substitutes as well as a collective resource about all substitutes. Our district uses the following methods to obtain and store such information:

- Substitute teacher files which contain:
 - Resumes
 - Applications
 - Reactivations
 - E-mail addresses
 - References
 - Background checks
 - Interview reports
 - Evaluations from teachers and administrators
 - College credentials

- Automated substitute finder programs and reports
- Survey of substitutes including demographic information
- Attendance at orientations, Substitute Teacher Conferences, and Technology Fairs
- Database of all practicum students and student teachers placed in district classrooms
- Attendance at monthly Sub Caucus Committee meetings

WAYS to Train Substitute Teachers

Classroom teachers want substitutes who can serve as bridges rather than detours in the learning process for students. Substitutes tell me they want to be teachers and not babysitters or video monitors. They want teachers and administrators to know that they will continue the learning process if they are provided pertinent curricular and instructional training and are left adequate plans which they can implement.

Administrators want substitutes who can maintain order in the school environment and facilitate student learning.

To hear statistics that indicate one year of a student's K-12 educational experience is taught by substitute teachers serves as a compelling reason to establish and provide a well-rounded and on-going training program for substitutes.

In our district, we hold a large orientation program in August and January for all of our substitutes. Additional, day-long required orientation sessions are held four to six times per year for our emergency substitutes (called *local substitutes* in Nebraska).

Our student calendar provides a week's break every nine weeks during which we provide staff development for our teachers and a full-scale Substitute Teacher Conference for our substitutes. The October and January conferences provide multiple workshop sessions through which substitutes choose to rotate. The March conference is a large Technology Fair dedicated to providing extensive training in technology.

Topics for the conferences are determined by the Sub Caucus Committee, a survey of substitutes, requests from district and substitute staff, and the district administrator/supervisor of the substitute area. Staff development and HR personnel, district and building administrators, curriculum specialists, teachers, community, resources and experts, and substitute teachers present at these conferences. Topics covered include classroom management, subject

matter curriculum, educational philosophy, legal issues, and much more. Substitutes are paid for every conference they attend. An evaluation sheet is passed out at the Wrap-up Session, which substitutes complete and sign.

Our monthly Sub Caucus Committee meetings provide another source of training time, especially about district policies, curriculum, and future directions in instruction.

The quarterly *SubWays* newsletter, sent to each substitute, includes 4-12 pages of classroom management techniques, productive teaching tips and ideas, and curriculum delivery information. Every publication uses the *Subpack Stuffer* page from Utah State's *SubExchange* publication.

The wide array of courses offered by our district's large Staff Development program is available to every substitute at no cost. Information about these courses is available for review on the district's web site (www.lps.org) which substitutes may access through the free e-mail account.

Our curriculum specialists specifically design workshops for substitutes held after school and on Saturdays to provide training about their specific curriculum area.

WAYS to Retain Substitute Teachers

"You must be a rich district!" This was a comment made just prior to my addressing this next section when I spoke at the 2002 summer *SubSolutions Conference* in Park City, Utah. Our district is facing the same budgetary cutbacks and legislative shortfalls that befall most districts. However, if a district philosophically regards student learning and development as its primary mission, then how can it justifiably neglect or overlook the substitute teacher area – an area which accounts for one year of students' educational experience? For those districts whose philosophy is still searching for its operational sea legs, there are a myriad of *WAYS* that reflect and acknowledge a commitment to building a successful substitute teacher program.

WAYS to Cultivate Professional Perception and Recognition

Professional perception and recognition can go a long way on a short budget to enhance the working environment of substitutes. Helping substitutes see themselves as professionals and feel valued as *guest teachers* by district staff requires district-wide awareness, planning, deliberate intention, and consistency. The following techniques have been used in our district:

- Substitute Teacher Recognition Day during Teacher Appreciation Week (May 5-9, 2003)
- Local newspaper articles featuring pictures and articles about specific substitutes and the value of substitutes in the educational process
- Focused local media coverage (TV/radio) showcasing substitutes in the classrooms
- Specific identification of substitutes and their contributions featured in the *SubWays* newsletter
- Personal phone calls or e-mails from the district administrator informing them of the specific contents of positive reports received about them from building administrators, teachers, students, or parents
- Copies of positive reports placed in the teacher applicant files of those substitutes that are applying for teaching positions in the district
- End of semester thank you letters from building administrators to their building's substitutes
- Recognition of Sub Caucus Committee members at orientations, conferences and technology fairs
- Substitutes' presentation of workshops at conferences and orientations
- Substitute panels at local substitute orientations
- Regular surveys of substitutes for identification of substitute needs
- Input from evaluations completed by substitutes after each orientation, conference and technology fair used to plan the next orientation, conference or fair
- Formation of Sub Caucus Committee that meets regularly to address substitute issues and to collaboratively plan, implement, and assess the entire substitute teacher program
- Substitute choice of assignments – days, times, schools, teachers, grade levels, subject areas
- Job choice via *WebConnect* component of the CRS *SubFinder* system

WAYS to Empower Substitutes and Create Investment in Your Substitute Teacher Program

The Sub Caucus Committee is a vital link between the district and its substitutes. It is a volunteer group of substitutes that meet monthly and are highly dedicated to providing input to the entire substitute teacher program. The district administrator serves as the facilitator of the meeting. The time is spent in considerable discussion, planning, and addressing of specific concerns and questions. District information is shared by the administrator and input from the substitutes is gathered. The Sub Caucus Committee:

- Serves in a planning and advisory capacity
- Identifies staff development needs
- Plans for specific workshop offerings
- Assists with the set-up, registration, and clean-up of all orientations conferences, and technology fairs
- Addresses substitute issues and concerns
- Assists with the design of reporting forms and the Substitute Handbook
- Provides input to teachers and administrators through the district administrator
- Contributes to the design, writing, proofreading, and publications of the *SubWays* newsletter
- Serves as a professional network for other substitutes
- Enjoys socializing together at meetings and specific social events sponsored by the district administrator throughout the year

This forum also provides an opportunity for the district administrator to share national information about the substitute area (e.g. from the American Association of School Personnel Administrators (AASPA) conference or the SubSolutions conference). For our district, the Sub Caucus Committee is a highly useful and active exchange of ideas and information.

WAYS to Provide Communication Between the District and Substitutes

Communication serves as a tether between a district and its substitutes. It fosters personal investment, trust and knowledge. The assignment of a district administrator to supervise the substitute teacher program serves as a first communication of the district's

dedication to its substitutes. The district administrator opens and maintains the communication channels.

The district administrator is a most significant facilitator of two-way communication. They are responsible for the dissemination of specific, updated information pertinent to the substitute teacher program to all district staff and substitutes through the array of methods identified in the following paragraphs on a continuous basis.

In our district, our HR office produces a monthly publication for administrators called *The Resource*. In each publication, the district administrator writes an article entitled, the “Sub-lime Spot” which focuses upon substitute issues. This information is shared with building teachers by their administrators.

The *SubWays* newsletter is a 4-12 page quarterly publication produced by and for substitutes with the guidance of district administrators. Since a copy is sent to every substitute and multiple copies are sent to each school, it serves as an informational link throughout the district.

Each substitute is provided his or her own free e-mail account and internet access through the district. Through e-mail, the district administrator forwards district information and notices of staff development opportunities for all substitutes. Personal communication between the district administrator and individual substitutes is facilitated and expedited. With such quick access, substitutes have a voice; they have the ear of a district office worker.

The district Substitute Teacher Handbook serves as a significant communication tool. It contains district expectations, policies, legalities and information pertinent to the substitute teacher area. The information contained in the handbook is revised each year by the district administrator and the Sub Caucus Committee and is reviewed with new substitutes at every orientation. Each substitute is required to sign for a handbook prior to becoming actively employed. Large monthly calendars of the school year are included in this handbook on which substitutes can keep track of their daily assignments and job codes. Substitute meetings, conferences, orientations and staff development opportunities are identified on each month’s activities.

Fliers about not-previously stated meetings or staff development opportunities for substitutes are mailed to every substitute as needed. This is to ensure coverage that e-mail misses.

Surveying substitutes during orientations, via e-mail or in the *SubWays* newsletter provides communication from substitutes to the

district administrator. This information can then be used to develop or change aspects of the substitute teacher program or disseminated to appropriate audiences.

The Sub Caucus Committee developed two reports that are filled out by substitutes each day at the school they are assigned to teach. The first report is given to the building administrator. It is a quick checklist summary that a substitute provides about his or her experience at the school that day. It indicates whether appropriate provisions were made by the classroom teacher and the school office for the substitute. A second report is provided by the substitute to the classroom teacher. It includes a more specific analysis of the total day's happenings. By providing this information to both the teacher and the building administrator, a substitute helps influence the working conditions under which all substitutes work in the schools.

The necessity of providing appropriate plans, information and materials for substitutes is communicated through specific components on the teacher appraisal instrument in our district. Teachers who do not provide appropriate lesson plans, information, and materials for substitutes are regarded as not maintaining a productive learning environment for students and are appraised accordingly by their administrator. Building administrators are reminded of this specific responsibility in district administrative workshops focused on teacher appraisal.

Teachers and administrators are encouraged to fill out reports about each substitute that teaches in their school. These reports are sent to the district office and maintained in the individual substitute's file. This communication tool from the schools helps the district administrator monitor the quality of substitute performance.

WAYS to Invest in and Provide for Your Substitutes

Provisions that a district can make for its substitutes can go a long way to encourage the retention of substitutes without necessarily costing a significant amount of money. The following are some of our provisions to our substitutes:

- Access to all materials in the central media center and staff development department
- Up-to-date and inclusive substitute folders in each classroom in all schools
- *SubFinder/WebConnect* available 24/7 for future planning and job shopping options

- Picture ID's identical to district and building staff members
- Hang tags for best parking availabilities at all schools
- Free technology software
- Flu shots
- Activity tickets to all district events
- Giveaways at orientations, conferences and technology fairs
- Food and drink provided at all orientations, conferences, technology fairs
- Yearly pay increases based upon contract teacher percentage increases
- Extra pay for additional period teaching
- Additional pay for long term assignments (after 10 days and under 94 days)
- Teacher contract pay after 94 days
- Pay for attendance at orientations, Substitute Teacher Conferences, and Technology Fairs
- Pay to substitutes that assist with the publication of the SubWays newsletter
- End of year dinner for the Sub Caucus Committee provided by the district

Dismissal

Oddly enough, dismissal of unacceptable substitutes encourages quality substitute teacher retention. Substitutes who provide high quality performance indicate that they do not want the district's perception of professional substitutes to be sullied by the poor performance of a few. Their motto – "Keep the best! Improve or dismiss the rest!"

Therefore, our district believes that repeated negative reports about a substitute's performance signal the need for awareness and improvement, or dismissal. After three to four negative reports indicate a pattern of performance that does not meet district expectations, the district administrator meets personally with the substitute to go over the substance of the concerns and plan for remediation. Substitutes have the opportunity to present their perspective on the concerns or complaints. A form, developed by the district administrator, guides the identification of performance

problems and the discussion about a remediation plan. Timelines and specifics are clearly identified. If performance does not improve, the substitute may be dismissed or terminated. If the substitute is a teacher applicant, the summary of the remediation conference is placed in the substitute's teacher applicant file. In the case of inappropriate or harmful behavior, the district administrator may dismiss the substitute immediately.

Closing Remarks

When I announced that I was creating a booklet for my presentation at the *SubSolutions Conference* last summer, one of the substitutes asked if she could write a letter to be included that described her feelings about our substitute teacher program. She wanted the participants at the conference to know how our substitutes feel about our program. This is one short paragraph of her written sentiments.

“To be a substitute teacher for the Lincoln Public Schools is, as Martha Stewart would say, ‘a good thing.’ Although the substitute salary is not as high as administrators indicate they would like it to be, it has regularly increased. This is another indication to the substitute teacher that his/her services are valued by the school system. As substitute teachers increase their self-esteem and feelings of team inclusion, there is a benefit for everyone. More substitute teachers are available when needed and they, in turn, are interested in knowing about and buying into the system and school goals. Administrators, regular teachers, and substitute teachers are happier and more productive.”

I am thankful that the collaborative efforts and commitment of so many people has fostered this perception. It is certainly our preferred WAY to go!

Dr. Kay Byers has been the Supervisor of Elementary Personnel Services in Lincoln Public Schools, Lincoln, Nebraska for nine years. She also directs the Substitute Teacher Program, coordinates the practicum/student teacher placement program, and teaches a graduate supervision course for the University of Nebraska.

Remediation/Disciplinary Form

Conference with: _____

Date: _____

Schools blocking this substitute:

Date of block:

_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____

Classrooms blocking this substitute:

_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____

Concerns / issues:

Remediation plan / recommendation:

Administrator's Signature _____ Date _____