

Working Together To Solve Management Issues

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Did you ever hear the phrase, “Everybody’s business is nobody’s business?” Many times, substitute teaching programs take a back seat to other personnel issues such as recruiting and hiring teachers, training paraprofessionals, and staffing non-certified school positions. While these functions are critical to the operation of the school system, it would be extremely difficult for any school system to maintain the continuity of learning and achieve educational goals without quality substitute teachers. Effective substitute managers make the substitute teaching program their number one priority and work to energize a partnership between administrators, teachers and substitute teachers.

In recent years, the shortage of substitute teachers has plagued school systems nationwide, demanding the full attention of substitute managers. It became increasingly evident that teamwork was needed to recruit, train, motivate and retain a pool of qualified substitute teachers. Max Longhurst, Managing Editor of the *SubJournal*, states, “The shortage has brought substitute teaching to the forefront prompting changes in district practices, policies, and procedures. Now, instead of just looking for individuals to cover classes, districts can work on the quality of substitute teachers, including offering additional training”.

Administrators and substitute managers have a moral obligation to ensure that the best interests of our students guide policy and practice. We must be able to identify and implement best practices and elevate standards for substitute teachers and the substitute teaching program. Well trained, adequately supported substitute teachers, a positive work environment, and deserved recognition for a difficult task, improves instruction, fosters student achievement, and promotes our goal of serving the best interests of our students.

As a strategic approach to continual improvement, the Substitute Advisory Committee of the Fulton County School System recommended that additional emphasis be placed on the four critical elements mentioned above; training, support, a positive work environment and recognition.

Training

Substitute teachers who are trained in classroom management skills and effective student behavior strategies have a greater chance of succeeding than those who are sent to the classroom feeling inadequate and unprepared. Fewer problems arise when the substitute is confident in his or her ability to teach and effectively manage student behavior. Well trained substitutes need less intervention from school administrators enabling them to spend more time on student achievement and less time resolving substitute problems.

In an effort to provide our substitute teachers with the best possible training, the Fulton County School System began using the *Substitute Teacher Handbook*, written and published by the Substitute Teaching Institute at Utah State University. Each substitute is given the K-12 handbook at the beginning of the one day training workshop and instructions are given on the importance of using the handbook as a valuable resource tool. The handbook contains classroom management techniques, teaching strategies, and other vital information and materials to help the substitute teacher develop the skills that make them successful.

In addition to these subjects, the prospective substitute teachers are divided into groups to discuss possible solutions to a classroom management problem presented by the narrator. The substitutes are instructed to write their solutions on chart paper and hang the paper on the wall for other groups to view. Each group designates a spokesperson who is given five minutes to discuss their solutions. Substitutes benefit from this cooperative learning activity and the opportunity to share ideas on how to take charge of the classroom while communicating the significance of learning.

Training also includes discussion on appropriate and professional attire, the art of moving around the classroom, preventive discipline, substitute teacher folders, emergency and evacuation codes, legal issues, Board policies and procedures, Super SubPaks, and Dos and Don'ts for Substitute Teachers.

When substitutes feel confident in their abilities to actually teach, they are able to address problem behavior directly and immediately and maximize student opportunities for positive interaction. The most important element in the creation of an atmosphere that encourages learning is self confidence in one's ability to take control, teach behavioral expectations and maintain classroom order.

Support

Several years ago, the Fulton County School System began involving local school administrators in the district-wide substitute program. An assistant principal at each school is chosen as the Substitute Coordinator for that location. The Coordinator serves as the principal's designee to provide leadership to the program and a supportive framework for substitute employees. The Coordinator is empowered to enforce district policies, procedures and practices at the local school level and serves to provide an open communication vehicle between substitute teachers, teachers and administrators. Personnel from the office of Substitute Services meets with the Coordinators twice yearly to advise, assess, study and discuss possible solutions to mutually affirmed concerns or recommendations affecting the system-wide substitute teaching program.

The primary responsibility of the Substitute Coordinator is to support substitute teachers in enforcing school rules when dealing with inappropriate student behavior. The substitute's authority evaporates quickly when students learn that the school rules will not be enforced when a substitute is in charge of the classroom.

Respect is a key element in supporting substitute teachers. When administrators and teachers respect substitutes and their ability to "conduct business as usual," the level of confidence and performance improves dramatically. Students sense the level of respect afforded substitutes by the treatment they receive when other teachers or administrators visit the classroom. Student behavior also improves when they become aware that their guest teacher has the same authority to deal with misbehavior as their regular teacher.

Coordinators are responsible for furnishing substitutes with a Substitute Teacher Folder containing lesson plans, map of the school, school rules, class roll, schedules, names of persons to contact regarding instructional and discipline concerns and other pertinent information. Support also includes informing substitutes of all special activities and extra duties they are responsible for during the day.

It is the responsibility of the Coordinator to provide feedback to substitutes on performance, classroom management issues, dress, and other concerns noted during the school day. Beneficial feedback and honest communication provides support to the substitute by offering helpful suggestions to improve skills and techniques. Coordinators must conference with a substitute teacher before referring concerns to

the office of Substitute Services. Documentation of this conference must accompany all concerns before action will be taken at the central office level. Feedback is especially important for substitute teachers whose performance exceeds expectations.

Positive Work Environment

The feeling of not being respected, trusted or treated as professionals is the number one reason substitute teachers do not return to the classroom. Substitute teachers report over and over that administration and staff fail to recognize, acknowledge and appreciate their teaching abilities. In an attempt to make each school “sub friendly,” the Fulton County School System has established guidelines for creating a warm, supportive and positive school atmosphere in which substitutes feel welcome and appreciated. These guidelines include providing them with all information necessary for a safe and productive day and maintaining a positive supportive atmosphere.

An inviting workplace climate is necessary for any employee to achieve optimal performance but it is especially important to the substitute teacher. We have established Meet and Greet Committees to greet substitute teachers when they arrive at school, offer assistance and answer questions. The committee welcomes substitutes to the building, gives each substitute a personalized name tag, provides directions to the teachers lounge, cafeteria and other “need to know locations,” invites them to eat with other staff members during lunch, and thanks them for their service at the end of the day. These small but significant gestures get the day off to a smooth start and pave the way for a successful teaching experience.

We encourage and invite substitutes to attend staff meetings, sporting events, PTSA meetings and other school functions. To augment training, all substitute employees are eligible to register for in-service courses offered at our Staff Development Centers. All classes extended to our regular teaching staff are available to substitute teachers. Staff development classes provide substantial opportunities for continued professional growth and promote interaction with other leading professionals.

Teachers are responsible for naming a Student Ambassador to assist the substitute during the day. Student Ambassadors are dependable students who can provide reliable class information and be entrusted with the duty of taking notes and other paperwork to the school office. Teachers are also requested to designate a peer or

“buddy” teacher who is available to render assistance with discipline concerns or curriculum questions.

One of the most significant factors in creating a positive work environment is the reduction or elimination of stress. When teachers leave detailed lesson plans and engaging activities rather than busy work, the substitute is able to begin the day with clearly defined instructional goals. Students will be prepared in advance for a substitute when the teacher sets expectations for the day. Behavioral problems are minimized when students are aware that there will be consequences for unacceptable behavior when their regular teacher returns. Follow-up on discipline concerns reported by the substitute is expected.

Recognition

During the third week of April, Substitute Coordinators are reminded to begin plans and preparations for Substitute Appreciation Month. May has been designated as Substitute Appreciation Month, in conjunction with Teacher Appreciation Month, as a time to honor and reward the success of our substitute teachers. Each school is encouraged to use school based and community resources, creative ideas and inexpensive materials to recognize substitutes for a job well done.

Last year, school administrators invited substitute teachers to attend teas and socials held in their honor. Substitutes were given goodie bags containing various treats, coins to purchase sodas, pens, pencils, stickers, note pads and other items that could be placed in their SuperSubPak. Coffee mugs, insulated tumblers, T-shirts, insulated lunch bags, and tote bags were given as gifts. Other schools provided substitutes with coupons redeemable for lunch, snacks, coffee and sodas, as well as free tickets to school sporting events, plays and concerts.

A high school in our district called upon students and staff members to take part in the celebration by giving of their time and efforts. On different days, students of the Fellowship of Christian Athletes, the Beta Club and the Student Council prepared breakfast for substitutes, the Anchor club served “Subs for the Subs”, clerical staff members prepared “snack sacks” that were given to the subs when they arrived at school, and special education students painted and decorated banners placed around the school to say thank you. The program was so successful that staff and students are already working on ideas for this year’s Substitute Appreciation Month.

Our Art Department is currently working with a group of art students to design a thank you card that will be sent from the office of Substitute Services to each substitute at the end of the school year. In addition to thanking them for a job well done, they will be reminded to renew their paperwork for the upcoming school year.

Substitute teachers deserve status and recognition. We must educate teachers and students to the fact that substitute teachers have something of their own to offer and that under difficult conditions, they are carrying out the wishes of the classroom teacher. Public recognition to reward and recognize is a positive experience that will go a long way to insure a quality pool of substitute teachers for your district.

Conclusion

Following the implementation of these four basic concepts, our substitute retention rate jumped to over eighty percent. Fluctuation in the national economy certainly has a significant effect on the numbers of substitutes returning from year to year; however, with the continuation of this training, we expect to maintain this yearly retention rate.

A successful, fine-tuned substitute teaching program must include these ingredients: extensive training in classroom management techniques and student behavior strategies, support from administrators, teachers and other staff members, a positive workplace climate, and deserved recognition for accomplishing a difficult task.

District SubManagers and site-based Substitute Coordinators must take a pro-active approach to promote teacher awareness of the importance of preparing their students and classrooms for a substitute. Teachers must be encouraged to maintain substitute folders that include complete, updated lesson plans, a class list, emergency evacuation plans and other information necessary for a successful day of teaching.

Substitute teachers are an important link in the education process and a vital part of the school system's total education program. Their success means that our students are receiving the continued learning opportunities they deserve. We must work together as an involved and committed team, we provide the most important benefit of all. . . a quality education that will prepare our students for the changing future.

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