

## **St. Tammany Parish— On the Move from Good to Great**

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### **Creating a Substitute Program**

**R**ecruiting and retaining substitute teachers is a challenge all school districts face. Some falsely believe that insufficient pay is the number one reason for these problems. Research, however, reveals that a lack of formal training is the number one contributor to turnover. “The key to attracting qualified substitute teachers is not to lower the requirements or increase the pay,” quotes Geoffrey Smith, director of the Substitute Teaching Institute at Utah State University (STI/USU), “the key is training.” Skilled substitute teachers have a positive and significant impact on the quality of education while the permanent teacher is away. They become a successful partner in the learning process, not just a replacement in the classroom for the day. St. Tammany Parish Public Schools serves 35,500 students in 51 public schools in southeast Louisiana, covering 854.4 square miles in Southeast Louisiana. Realizing that St. Tammany Parish needed a comprehensive substitute teacher training program, the Assistant Superintendent of Human Resources instituted a new position; coordinator of substitute certification and professional development.

“In my opinion, a reevaluation of the importance of substitutes as they relate to the learning process of students, the value of a partnership with subs so they are treated as professionals and as allies within our schools, was needed,” said Peter Jabbia. “The Human Resources Department is working diligently to provide our students with the best educational program possible and substitute teaching is an important component of our program. It would be better to take the time necessary to have a first class program that was meaningful for our substitutes from the outset, than need major overhauls frequently throughout implementation of a quick fix to our critical need for substitute teachers.”

I assumed the role of Professional Development Coordinator in January 2004. My responsibilities to this program include:

- Developing, coordinating, facilitating, and implementing the new mandatory substitute teacher training program

- Implementing continuing education workshops in targeted fields of education such as special education and specific content areas
- Working as the automated calling system administrator for teachers and substitute teachers
- Using the information from surveys and evaluations to continually upgrade the training program.

The Office of Professional Development also oversees background and fingerprint checks, paperwork and data entry, and partnership work with schools for all substitutes in St. Tammany Parish (secretarial, custodial, paraprofessional, food service, and teachers).

Using 24 years of teaching experience, three days at STI's SubSolutions Conference in February 2004, research, and shelves of workshop materials, I designed a mandated eight-hour training for substitute teachers. The cost of the training is \$25, which was reimbursed to substitutes after the tenth day substituting in St. Tammany Parish during the 2004-05 school year. The rationale for the cost of the workshop, which includes a *Substitute Teacher Handbook*, is that a financial commitment makes the training more valuable and more meaningful than having to "give up a day." Having the fee reimbursed also relates the message that we want dedication and serves as an incentive for continued service in our system. The Human Resource Department mailed 1300 letters to current substitutes during the 2004 spring semester explaining the purposes, dates, times, and locations of the training sessions. Memos were also sent to the school administrators reminding them that all substitutes must participate in this training session before working during the 2004-05 school year. As a result, many of the preferred substitutes had reinforced communication to sign up for the mandated training.

Teacher workshop rooms were reserved for Monday, Wednesday, and Friday in three different locations of the parish to accommodate the substitutes' locality in our district. I remained in the office Tuesdays and Thursdays to oversee all substitute registration for the school district. The workshop was limited to 30 participants to more effectively involve participants in group interaction and hands-on activities to facilitate learning.

As of June 2004, all substitute teachers were deactivated on our payroll system and the automated calling system. Current substitutes from the previous school year were reactivated after attending the training and new substitutes signed up for a workshop as they

registered to work in St. Tammany's school system. All substitute teachers received a certificate of training upon completion of the workshop.

Mandated training began April 2004, and as of February 2005, 1400 substitutes were trained to be guest teachers in St. Tammany schools. As Coordinator of Professional Development, I continue training on a weekly basis as needed according to substitute teacher sign-ups and registration. Both at registration and workshops, I reiterate that substitutes are an essential and valuable part of the St. Tammany Parish professional educational team, and with training, they can achieve success in all teaching endeavors.

#### **Much More Than a 'Caretaker' for the Day**

With No Child Left Behind legislation setting higher standards and demands on schools, St. Tammany Parish knows that maximizing each day of a student's education is imperative. The services of a dependable, well-prepared substitute are essential to providing continuity in student academic achievement. The purpose of the workshop is to enhance the ability of the substitute teacher to be much more than just a caretaker in the classroom. Implementation of a training program decreases incidences that cause problems and increases student learning.

If school reform efforts are to truly improve the quality of teaching and learning in schools, then it is time to add substitutes to the community of educators and make fundamental and lasting changes in the way professional learning is perceived and executed. Strong professional communities do not occur by accident. Substitute teachers must be equipped with knowledge and skills that enable them to build and sustain the St. Tammany Parish school system's missions and have high quality interpersonal relationships founded on trust and respect.

We find that training substitutes makes them feel important, professional, confident, and valued. One important aspect of this program is that it has upgraded the status of respect toward substitute teachers from every level—administration, faculty, students, and parents. Hence, a paradigm-shift in the belief of the worth of the sub. A subfriendly school atmosphere is the result of the time and money spent to recruit, hire, and train substitutes, as well as implement the best practices of intensified professional development. This brings meaningful appreciation for guest teachers who are so important in maintaining continuity in student learning and success in district accountability.

Another important aspect of this paradigm shift is the higher retention rate of substitute teachers. Surveys given to substitute teachers reveal that the average substitute teacher in St. Tammany Parish has 3.2 years teaching experience. The hope is that this number grows as St. Tammany takes a proactive approach to make substitutes feel valued by promoting teacher awareness of the importance substitute teachers play in the education of students.

The parish educational television channel aired a documentary on the substitute teacher training at St. Tammany. News that professional development is given to guest teachers and that they are considered a valued part of the educational team has spread throughout the community.

#### **The Workshop Components**

The eight-hour workshop begins with positive reception and stated value for the substitute teacher in St. Tammany Parish. A history of the program in St. Tammany, with numbers of how many teachers and students substitutes help on a daily basis, helps eliminate the feeling that the workshop day is just one more thing demanded of substitute teachers. This sets the tone of appreciation and importance.

St. Tammany discusses aspects of professionalism, stressing the dress code, good work attitude, confidentiality, and language. School check-in procedures are covered, giving examples of the paperwork to be completed and suggestions are given to ask for the school map, bell schedule, bus schedule, and any other pertinent information to become familiar with the policies, procedures, and practices of the St. Tammany Parish school system. We discuss the importance of leaving a detailed substitute teacher report, keeping an upbeat attitude, and playing the role of motivator throughout the day.

The morning session is completed with classroom management. We discuss the five skills of effective classroom management as outlined in the *Substitute Teacher Handbook*. Each skill is reinforced with stories from my own and other substitutes' experiences. In Skill #5, Avoiding Traps (*Substitute Teacher Handbook*, 2004, p. 24), workshop participants are divided into groups and asked to teach the trap. Most of the teaching is done through role-play and becomes quite creative and informative. Whether explaining the traps using discussion, giving examples of how to avoid the trap and suggestions for better teaching strategies, or using a skit to demonstrate what not to do, evaluations indicate that all substitute teachers appreciate the hands-on learning activities.

The afternoon session is composed of two sections—teaching strategies and district policies. During the teaching strategy session, participants take a perceptual learning style quiz that demonstrates the differences between visual, auditory, tactile and the kinesthetic learners. The substitute teacher who is given suggestions on things to do that meet all students’ needs is better equipped to keep students on task.

In this part of the workshop participants also learn teaching strategies through hands-on learning activities. Participants do:

- A small group brainstorming activity with similes (Ketterlin, 2004)
- Cooperative group activities with Survival in the Desert (similar to “Desert Dilemma,” *Substitute Teacher Handbook K-12*, 2004, pp. 167-168)
- Concept maps (*Substitute Teacher Handbook K-12*, 2004, p. 42)
- K-W-L charts (*Substitute Teacher Handbook K-12*, 2004, p. 44) using the printed activities in the Substitute Teacher Handbook.
- Role-play a jigsaw learning activity with a mathematics pattern worksheet (*Substitute Teacher Handbook K-12, 5th Edition*, 2003, p. 231).
- A carousel brainstorming activity, if time permits, with chapter 5 (*Substitute Teacher Handbook K-12*, 2004) as outlined in the “Special Education and Legal Issues” activity in the *SubTrainer Manual* (2005, p.79). This exercise is an example of a kinesthetic and brainstorming activity, and also serves as a starter activity to policies and procedures of St. Tammany Parish.

Staff development that improves learning of all students organizes substitutes into learning communities whose goals are aligned with those of the school and district. The following is a summary of the Policies and Procedures segment of the workshop:

- Emergency codes and evacuation routes
- Student check out procedures
- Additional duties
- Accident and medical emergency procedures
- Medication policies

- The substitute workday
- Audio visual and technology policies

Participants receive a district handbook, which includes information concerning student discipline, attendance, and special education forms. Participants watch a video addressing sexual harassment that all employees of the Parish must view.

Many of the workshop evaluations indicate that substitutes are appreciative of this part of the day, as they assume the same responsibilities and duties as the classroom teacher and are held to the same ethical and legal standards. Sharing this information gives substitutes empowerment and becomes a powerful motivator for people who might otherwise feel uncomfortable with substitute teaching, to get past their fears and into the classroom.

PowerPoint slides are used as visual aids for each component of the workshop. The visual demonstrations, group interactions, hands-on learning activities, role playing, and discussion of concrete examples of lesson plans, both in the handouts and the Substitute Teacher Handbook exemplify how we want students to learn in the classroom, and models ways for the substitute to be an effective and motivating teacher.

Participants leave the workshop with:

- *Substitute Teacher Handbook*
- Parish School Calendar
- Handouts on Classroom Management and Teaching Strategies
- Policies and Procedures of St. Tammany Parish Public Schools
- Student Discipline and Attendance Handbook
- Small note pad that reads *Substitutes: Helping our Schools Serve Every Child, Every Day*
- Certificate of Training

The evaluations have overwhelmingly been positive with comments such as, “Why didn’t you do this years before? I felt so inadequate when I first started subbing alone and thrown to the wolves.” Another workshop participant said the training “eased my fears and wondering about walking into the classroom situation, and I feel ready for the task at hand.” One substitute, Dale Oriol, writes, “I cannot tell you how much I love being a sub. Your workshop was top notch. Now I know why St. Tammany Parish has such a great reputation in public education.”

Our training program has been extended with two additional workshops—*Everything You Wanted to Know About Special Education, But Wwere Afraid to Ask* and *Teaching Strategies and Classroom Management Scenarios*. The first workshop is for the substitute teacher in the special education classroom. We introduce acronyms, definitions, and meanings of special education terms found in lesson plans and on the permanent teacher's substitute folder. We discuss teaching strategies and crisis management plans for the special education classroom, as well as practice compassionate but firm responses.

In *Teaching Strategy and Classroom Management Scenarios*, we enhance techniques learned from the mandated training with positive and proactive strategies that embrace ten different classroom management problems and ten different hard-to-present lesson plans. The volunteer workshops have been well attended and we find our substitutes appreciate the continued professional development.

Dennis Sparks, Executive Director of the National Staff Development Council, says that school employees “will choose to change more readily from the example set by our own transformation than by any demand we make of them.” We cannot just demand that our substitutes become more professional and assume the teacher role. With guided examples of how to be a motivating facilitator of the lesson plan and a feeling of appreciation from administration and faculty, we hope to develop a core group of substitute teachers who love subbing in our schools!

Staff development that improves the learning of all students requires skillful school and district leaders who guide continuous improvement. In order to achieve this we have invited our substitutes to “jump on board.”

Since assuming the role of coordinator of this program, I realize the enormity of this task and hope to present a road map for our substitutes that provides directions to a destination, without dictating the mode of transportation, its speed, or how many rest stops the driver is to make along the way. The ultimate goal is to increase learning for all students. With that in mind, we welcome our substitutes aboard!

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