

# Substitutes = Q x Q: Maintaining the Quality While Managing the Quantity

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When the 2001-2002 school year ended, 2,300 substitutes appeared on the substitute roster for Loudoun County Public Schools (LCPS). Our substitute roster had increased 58% from the 2000-2001 school year. After the events of 9/11, we saw an increase in interest in our substitute program unlike anything Loudoun County Public Schools had ever experienced before. We began to break national trends in education for substitute program “popularity.” Airline, hotel, and restaurant layoffs brought those interested in substituting. Information technology layoff victims and victims of—as one young man described it—the “dot-bomb” had us interviewing people for substitute positions who previously earned lucrative six-figure salaries.

Given the speed that “the quantity” of substitutes rose, sometimes “the quality” was left behind. We had a few problems throughout the year... (Imagine my very dry throat as I spoke with a retired FBI agent—who looked a whole lot like Arnold Schartznegger—and advised him “...he just wasn’t working out as a substitute”) that made it clear we needed to manage our substitute processes better. This paper describes our efforts to upgrade our substitute system. Since the volume of substitutes entering our program that required us to hold interview sessions *EVERY* Wednesday and orientation sessions *EVERY* Friday throughout the 2001-2002 school year, this was no easy task.

## Improving Communications and Hiring

In an attempt to better serve the schools to whom we were providing substitutes each day and to best utilize our technology abilities, we enhanced communication to our Sub-Central Office by providing a “private – administrator use-only” telephone number for immediate access from the schools to the Sub-Central Office. We also provided an e-mail address for additional early-morning administrative “cries for help!” We began providing substitute rosters to the schools via e-mail eliminating the need for thousands of pages of printed rosters. The e-mail roster process also provided each school instant, up-to-date information for substitutes for their school.

We became the first school system in the State of Virginia and one of the first school systems in the United States to implement instant, on-line fingerprint results from the FBI. Once fingerprints are taken from a substitute applicant, results from “The Bureau” are known to members of the Department for Personnel Services within twenty minutes. Applicants with unacceptable fingerprint reports are immediately notified of their disqualification from the substitute process.

Beginning with the 2002-2003 school year we implemented the Gallup/Automated Teacher Screener (ATS). With the ATS we review information from new substitute applicants prior to the applicant being permitted to advance in the substitute application process. Substitute applicants not meeting specific requirements in completing the ATS receive no further consideration in becoming a substitute with our school system.

### **Our Training Program**

In preparation for the 2002-2003 school year we hosted focus groups of substitutes to hear what they had to say regarding their “life as a substitute” for LCPS. We met with substitutes who volunteered their time to discuss issues relevant to substituting that were important to them. We also spoke with a group of our school principals and assistant principals to share equal time in listening to concerns from the administrative side of “life with substitutes.” The information received from both groups was assembled and discussions began for ways to improve the substitute training program.

Additionally, because of the problems we experienced we employed newly retired school principals and other retired school administrators to speak at Substitute Orientation sessions. Their role was to instruct substitute applicants attending the sessions about proper classroom management and discipline techniques. To help assure the administrators understood the important issues and techniques surrounding substitute training, we brought the district training coordinator of the award-winning Utah State University (USU) Substitute Teaching Institute, to Loudoun County Public Schools. With his help, we trained administrators associated with the substitute program in classroom instructional techniques and classroom management practices scientifically structured for substitute teachers.

## **Refresher Sessions**

The information we received in the USU training was also helpful as we created “Substitute Refresher Sessions.” A retired LCPS school principal participated in the USU training and provided substitutes (who were renewing their substitute credentials for the 2002-2003 school year) with the information we learned from USU, adding her own finesse from her years as a school administrator.

As their professional reference tool to supplement our refresher training, we encouraged the substitutes to purchase the USU *Substitute Teacher Handbook*. To our delight, the USU Handbooks are selling like hotcakes! We are also surprised and excited that our schools are purchasing the USU handbook for their school library as a reference manual for substitutes accepting assignments at their school.

A total of four “Substitute Refresher Sessions” were held throughout the summer of 2002. Because of increased volume and requests from previous substitutes, two additional refresher sessions were held immediately after school began. Because of an *anticipated* volume of substitutes wanting to attend refresher sessions, on-line pre-registration was required for those wanting to attend refresher sessions. Sessions were split by the alphabet of last name. Those attending refreshers were required to pre-register for and attend one of two sessions that corresponded with their last name. The pre-registration improved organization of materials needed and session preparation. Over 800 substitutes returned from the previous school year to renew their substitute credentials. Many of those attending the refresher sessions complimented our training program describing it as “the best session we’ve ever attended as a substitute for LCPS!”

## **Administrative Substitute Workshops**

We also held Administrative Substitute Workshops to provide school principals and assistant principals with news and information from the Sub-Central Office. Automation has quickly become our middle name as we continue to find ways and methods to assist schools and the substitutes in streamlining information given to and sent from Sub-Central.

## **Substitute Teacher WebCenter**

In order to manage the substitutes more efficiently, we launched the eSchool Solutions automated substitute management system, WebCenter. WebCenter allows administrators web access to add absences, eliminating a telephone call. It also makes reports available

regarding employee absences in their schools. Substitutes using WebCenter can change their substitute location/position profiles on-line and provides them the ability to review their substitute assignments. Additional on-line information for substitutes was implemented to help them with form completion and help us manage the fingerprinting session and orientation registration process.

Because requests for long-term substitute assignments (more than 10 days in length) from our schools have soared, we have moved the application process for these absences online. Utilization of an electronic Long-Term Substitute Request Form was developed for transmission of the request from the school to Sub-Central. Plans are underway to provide electronic signatures from the school administrators. The placement of signing platforms at each school will be implemented to obtain the signature of the substitute for expedition of long-term substitute paperwork. We executed a well-received pilot program for the electronic form at one of our larger high schools.

## **Conclusion**

With the attendance at the substitute refreshers – as well as the e-mails and telephone calls we are receiving each day indicating what's to come – we anticipate our substitute program will be equally as popular during the next school year. Hopefully, with the new measures in place for screening substitute applicants, the implementation of advanced training for new substitutes entering the program and the crystal-ball foresight to predict “what's to come,” many substitutes will enjoy speaking Arnold's famous words of “I'll be back!” And, being the eternal optimist – I will not shiver when I hear those words spoken!

*Rebecca Ayling is a 13-year veteran of the Loudoun County Public Schools and the Department for Personnel Services. Previously holding the positions of Benefits Specialist, Licensure Specialist, and Administrative Assistant to the Assistant Superintendent for Personnel Services, she has held the position of Personnel Specialist for over a year. Assisting in the management of the substitute program serving the 39,000 students of Loudoun County Public Schools, Rebecca is also involved with hiring more than 2,000 licensed and support positions each school year for a rapidly growing school system.*