

Substitute Teachers:

Not Just a Warm Body Anymore!

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Thesis

In-service training is essential in developing a larger pool of qualified substitute teachers.

Abstract

Nationwide, schools have suffered a shortage of substitute teachers. The problem is escalating due to the job market and school reforms. As the number of available substitutes has diminished, it has caused school systems to alter their standards for hiring substitute teachers.

The purpose of this research was to determine the training needs in the Elmira Heights, New York area based on a study conducted in the Elmira Heights Central School District.

Literature Review

Webster's Dictionary defines 'sub' as being below, beneath, under and inferior. With these definitions in mind, it is easy to understand why substitute teachers tend to be treated as marginal members of the educational society and given little respect. They are seen as the Rodney Dangerfield of the teaching profession, the spare tire, and the low end of the food chain. Administrators, teachers or students rarely regard substitutes as effective instructors who meet acceptable standards. Too often, they see themselves as less than professional.

Substitute teaching has never been an attractive position. The problems that existed fifty years ago still exist for substitutes, and the solutions for these problems seem as elusive as ever (Abdal-Haqq, 1997). When a substitute is in a classroom, discipline is likely to be more difficult. The regular classroom teacher often leaves poor lesson plans and no seating chart. Too frequently, administration is neither supportive nor attentive to the substitute. Wages are low and no benefits are offered. Substitutes must be versatile as they move from school to school and class to class (Risley, 1998). Substitute teaching is probably the most difficult and demanding job within the field of education and probably the one that receives the least amount of attention and support (St. Michel, 1995; Galvez-Martin, 1997).

Schools do not consider substitute teachers a priority concern since they are only called upon when needed. Statistics show that in the thirteen years between kindergarten and twelfth grade the average student will spend about one full year with a substitute teacher (Longhurst, Smith, & Sorenson, 2000). In most cases, that is a full year with a person not as qualified as the regular teacher. Nationwide, almost five million children walk into 274,000 classrooms to find a substitute teacher each day (Henry, 1995). An untrained substitute can impede the learning of a struggling student. School districts need to realize that substitute teachers are a very necessary part of ongoing daily teaching. In the absence of the regular teacher, the substitute must be able to present the curriculum and manage the classroom effectively. Reduction in the quality of education is not acceptable. Students cannot afford to miss a single day of instruction (Elizabeth, 2001).

Individuals who substitute teach are doing so to earn an income, but they are unlikely doing so to become rich (Abdal-Haqq, 1997). One of the main reasons for substituting is to gain experience and make contacts that may lead to permanent employment. Other advantages to substitute teaching are the flexible hours, the lesser time demands, and the chance to see different schools and become aware of teacher vacancies. Relatively few people substitute for more than a year and even fewer make a career of it (Abdal-Haqq, 1997). As the supply shifts, it is constantly necessary to replenish the supply with qualified individuals.

The substitute shortage has forced administrators to become creative in filling openings left by absent teachers. Many districts have begun to actively recruit substitutes. Some schools have enlisted the help of temporary staffing agencies such as Kelly Services (School Board News, 1999). College students, parents, and other members of the community have been encouraged to substitute. Retired teachers are being convinced to come back into the classroom as substitute teachers. Some schools are hiring permanent full-time substitutes to assure coverage when needed. In spite of these innovative ideas, schools are continuing to come up short of replacements for absent teachers.

The American Association of School Administrators has offered some strategies for coping with the shortage (Russo, 2001). By raising the per diem rate of pay and offering health benefits as a reward for frequent substituting, schools can make the substituting

job more attractive. They can also offer cash stipends to individuals who guarantee to be available at any time, in any classroom. It should be noted that few districts found a strong or permanent response to the financial incentives. Since substitutes are obviously not in it for the money, school districts are beginning to realize that they must improve the substitute's experiences in the classroom. By offering a "sub friendly" atmosphere, these guest teachers are offered a sense of well-earned dignity. If substitutes were surveyed every one or two years, administrators would be able to study their experiences and attempt to improve them. In schools that have implemented a "sub friendly" program where substitutes have ID badges, adequate lesson plans are left, and the administrators regularly welcome the substitutes to their buildings, the turnover is reduced and the students have more continuity of learning (Russo, 2001).

As the availability of certified substitutes shrank, schools were forced to lower their standards. Presently, some districts are hiring individuals with no more than a high school diploma. In spite of the decline in qualifications, the "professional principle" must be adhered to (Stommen, 1987). Success as a substitute is not always related to a degree (Evans, 2000). By lowering the educational requirements, the availability of potential substitutes expands to help deal with the growing demand. Lowering the requirements to a high school diploma raises concerns about the quality of education and the liability for student safety. High profile cases where substitutes have been accused of unprofessional or even criminal behavior have generated attention to the issue of substitute teacher quality (Russo, 2001).

With the varied ability levels of the teachers, substitute teacher programs cannot simply exist. It is the responsibility of the school system to prepare these educators for success so that they might better educate our children. A good substitute program calls for the following (Abdal-Haqq, 1997):

- Increased collaboration between the school district and the substitute teacher.
- Evaluation and feedback to the substitutes
- Improved recruitment
- Development of a school handbook of rules and policies
- Clarification of the substitute's role and the school's expectations
- Providing specific in-service training

- Clear lesson plans left for substitutes
- Providing a district substitute coordinator

Terrie St. Michel (1995) also recommends improving benefits offered to substitutes and treating them as professionals.

When substitute teachers are as familiar with the school system as its regular teachers, they become effective (Galvez-Martin, 1997). Orientation and training are the key ingredients to bringing substitutes on-board. Orientation should be presented in late summer for incoming substitutes. They should become acquainted with administrators and be provided with packets containing school rules, maps, and a handbook of school policies. At this meeting the school's expectations should be made clear. Substitutes should understand that they will be expected to teach (Galvez-Martin, 1997). A comprehensive training program to prepare the substitute for the classroom must follow the orientation. This was a common premise among all research presented.

A national survey conducted by the Substitute Teaching Institute at Utah State University shows that only ten percent of our schools provide more than two hours of training and fifty-three percent provide no training at all (Longhurst, Smith, & Sorenson, 2000). To improve the likelihood of student achievement, effective training and evaluation programs must be implemented.

Progressive minded districts have already begun to make changes in the way they perceive their substitute teachers. Programs to achieve quality performance have already been put in place in these districts. Positive results are being noted in both the quality of work and the retention rates of substitutes who have experienced training (Russo, 2001). "No other small investment in education today will make a more significant improvement in the classroom than training the substitute" (Smith, 1999).

Creating a comprehensive training program should not be an overwhelming project (Stommen, 1987). Substitutes should be paid to attend workshop sessions, thereby making this a professional experience. When the substitute is familiar with expectations and is given the tools to use, you no longer have a "warm body" in the classroom, you have a quality substitute (Russo, 2001). With sound classroom management skills, basic knowledge of legal and safety issues, the ability to implement basic teaching strategies, and a resource kit, substitute teachers have the foundation to maintain a productive classroom environment (Longhurst, Smith, & Sorenson,

2000). Training provides the ability to raise academic standards and establish accountability.

Training programs must address the following issues vital in the preparation of a quality substitute teacher (Longhurst, Smith & Sorenson, 2000):

- Being prepared and professional
- Classroom management skills
- Legal and first aid issues
- Teaching and instructional strategies
- Use of fill-in activities
- Creation of a survival kit

The Substitute Teaching Institute recommends a minimum of three full-day sessions. Two of the days should be devoted to instruction and at least one day should be spent shadowing a regular teacher. In addition to the intense training, districts should also offer ongoing in-service workshops throughout the year to improve the professionalism of substitutes. Administrators should also encourage substitutes to attend faculty meetings to better acquaint themselves with school curriculum and policies.

An evaluation of the substitute should be done after the training has been completed and feedback on performance should be given to the substitute. This assessment will help districts to determine the effectiveness of the training and the quality of the substitutes they have hired. It will also give the substitute the image of a trained professional capable of providing students with continuity of education when the regular teacher is absent.

Does skill training for substitute teachers improve factors leading to student achievement? According to Longhurst, Smith and Sorenson (2000), the answer is a resounding YES! Studies show that when substitute training is conducted regularly, both the number of applicants and employee longevity increase significantly. Plus, reported complaints about substitutes drop in half (Smith, 1999). When we look at having all students meet the standards, we must not overlook the contact that substitute teachers have with these students. Training provides substitutes with the skills they need to enter any classroom and provide a positive learning atmosphere.

Primary Research

The Study

Primary research for this project was conducted in the Elmira Heights Central School District. This is a relatively small district with 1,360 students being taught in two buildings. They employ 93 full-time teachers.

The prime importance of this study was to determine what is necessary to improve the quality of substitute teachers hired by the district. In order to evaluate the program, survey and interview methods were used. By obtaining viewpoints of administrators, teachers, students and substitutes, it was possible to collect data that provides a broad picture of the situation.

Methodology

Surveys

Two surveys were designed for this study, and administered before any training of substitutes was offered in order to ascertain whether training substitutes was needed. The first was a survey given to elementary and middle school teachers (Appendix 1). Six areas including: behavior management, following lesson plans, independent lesson plans implemented, classroom routines followed, completed papers, and student safety and supervision, were listed. The teachers were asked to comment on their expectations of a substitute in their classroom in each of the areas. Questions were asked about the teacher's satisfaction level with the availability of qualified substitutes as well as the performance of the substitutes provided. A second survey (Appendix 2) was designed for substitute teachers. Questions elicited information regarding training that they might have had and who had provided the training. Additional questions sought data regarding the length of their substitute teaching experience and whether they were certified teachers.

The design of these surveys allowed the researcher to analyze and compare the needs of both groups.

Student Reactions

Along with the surveys that were administered before substitute training, two elementary classes were asked to give their insights into a day with a substitute teacher in order to ascertain whether training substitutes was needed from the prospective of students. The students

were approached immediately after spending a day with a substitute in their classroom. The students were asked to write about the best and worst things that happened during that day, what their behavior was like and how they felt about the day.

Interviews

Both the elementary and middle school principals were interviewed before the project began. They were told the scope of the study and asked for their reactions to it. The superintendent was interviewed at the outset of the project. He was asked about the qualifications of substitute in his district and how they were hired. He was also asked about the availability of training in the area.

Phone interviews were conducted with the human resources personnel at Elmira City School District, Horseheads Central School District, and a resource person at our local Board of Cooperative Educational Services Teacher Resource Center to ascertain the qualifications to substitute in neighboring districts and the local availability of training programs.

Statistical Data Collection

The district's personnel office was approached to obtain numerical data on the number of teachers and substitutes hired by the district. Information was also requested pertaining to the number of days substitutes have worked in the district during the 2000-2001 school year. No names were included in this information to maintain privacy.

Discussion

Even though teachers and substitutes were surveyed with different instruments, the responses were clearly similar in nature. Both groups in the Elmira Heights District agree that substitutes need to be proficient in classroom management, school policies and rules, presentation of planned lessons and behavior management. These were all listed as high priorities in the teacher's expectations. Not surprisingly, the substitutes prioritized the same areas for training in order to be more comfortable in the classroom.

Through teacher interviews, after having a substitute in the classroom, the researcher was able to compare the length of service and amount of professional preparation the substitute had with the satisfaction of the classroom teacher. The need for training became unmistakably clear as teacher's negative comments were directly related to persons who were not aware of school policies or

classroom strategies that would have made the day more successful. Reactions of the fourth grade students to their substitute teacher demonstrated their expectations had not been met.

Had the substitute been armed with the proper information needed for survival in the classroom, they may have had the skills to conduct the classroom in a manner that would have produced uninterrupted learning and a more satisfied classroom teacher. Information appears to be the missing element of success in this program.

The Personnel Department's statistical data indicates that the Elmira Heights district is below the national average in teacher absenteeism compared to national studies. They do tend to use more certified substitutes or substitutes with a degree other than education rather than non-degreed substitutes. However, as the substitute shortage grows, this may not always be possible. With this in mind, a training program should be in place to prepare substitutes to be successful in the classroom.

The researcher has found the district to be extremely substitute-friendly. Upon entering the building, the substitute is given a folder that includes a handbook of policies, a school map, a form for feedback to the administrators and teacher at the end of the day, as well as other forms the substitute may need during the day. Each classroom teacher has prepared a folder with seating charts, rules, routines, schedules, bus lists, health concerns and other helpful information to make the day go more smoothly. Generally, teachers leave detailed lesson plans to be followed. Grade level team teachers usually introduce themselves and make themselves available to assist when necessary. In addition, administration makes a point of touching base with each substitute at the beginning of each day.

Even with a substitute friendly atmosphere, the untrained substitute would greatly benefit from an in-service training program. They would acquire skills needed to present lessons, manage the classroom, and act in a professional manner. As a result, students would experience a normal day of learning in the safe and controlled atmosphere that they are accustomed to. The absent teacher would have her expectations met and be able to continue her plans without making drastic adjustments. Finally, training would raise the self-esteem of the substitute teacher as they begin to feel more positive results in the classroom.

Paula Edelmann worked as a substitute teacher for over ten years while her two sons were growing up. She then enrolled in the master's program at Elmira College to fulfill her dream of being a full time elementary school teacher. She is now employed by the Elmira Heights School District, New York, as a fifth grade teacher.

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