

One District's Experience In Creating An Effective Substitute Training Program

Michael Ballard

Increased demands on classroom accountability, and on teachers and students are a reality in education today. Teachers find that they have to do more with less or equal instructional time. Many teachers forego staff development opportunities or come to school when ill because of the pressures for academic achievement.

Reflecting this pressure, the substitute must be more of an instructor in the classroom than at any other time in public school history. The daily educational progress of each student, in every classroom, places increased demands on those who fill the ranks of the professional educator during a teacher's time of absence from the classroom.

Research from the Substitute Teaching Institute at Utah State University (STI/USU) indicates that one full year of a student's K-12 years is spent under the instruction of a substitute teacher.

Citrus County is attempting to address the issue of increased substitute training and effectiveness in the classroom in its search for highly qualified substitutes. Citrus County is striving to ensure that every student receives a high-quality education every single day he or she attends school. To do this, the school district is aggressively addressing training and the support needed to develop highly qualified substitute teachers.

What is a *highly qualified substitute*?

A highly qualified substitute is well versed in the techniques that produce an effective classroom in which the educational process continues during the regular teacher's absence.

In three years, at minimal cost, Citrus County's substitute training program has evolved from a very good, 1-day orientation program to a nationally recognized 2 1/2-day program of training with an additional substitute support in the form of a continuing education component. The goal of the training is to produce highly qualified substitutes who are able to continue educating students during the professional educators absence from the classroom.

The basic question

What can a district—any district—do to improve the level of training for substitutes at a minimal cost in manpower, materials, and other resources so that the substitute can effectively conduct the class and manage the educational processes left by the instructor?

The Citrus County School District

The Citrus County (Florida) School District is made up of 20 schools, approximately 16,000 students, and over 1000 teachers. Nearly 450 names of substitute teachers are provided to schools at the start of each year. An additional 200 substitutes go through the initial training annually. As with other districts, Citrus County's substitute program is a revolving door, with many being provided the initial training, yet many leaving the profession after the first year.

As an education system, Citrus County has worked hard to provide staff development to its administrators, teachers, and support personnel. However, substitutes were left out of the cycle of training after the initial one-day orientation and training session. Florida statutes require that to qualify as a substitute, an individual must have a minimum of a high school diploma, pay for drug testing and a background check, attend a district level orientation, and be available to the schools. The statutes were recently revised to include classroom skills in the initial training of substitutes.

After reviewing the needs of Citrus County School District's students and how to better prepare the substitute for the classroom, the Planning and Development Department created a three-year initial program responsible for professional staff development in the district.

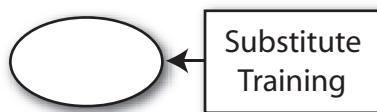
Year One

The first year (2002-2003) was a data creation and gathering year, with the goal to determine what is needed to create highly qualified substitutes for use in the district.

In 2002-2003, the Substitute Orientation program consisted of a one-day workshop with a locally produced manual titled the Substitute Handbook. In that workshop the basic "orientation" procedures were explained:

- Pay
- Health issues
- Legal requirements
- Harassment legislation

A brief overview by an assistant principal of discipline procedures, and an awareness session by the Exceptional Student Department were also included in the workshop.



(2002 One-day Substitute Orientation program)

Feedback was gathered from the substitutes through training exit forms asking what was good about the training, needed improvement, suggestions, and questions that perhaps had not been answered. These data were analyzed during the year, and suggested improvements made to the program.

The information also indicated that the training was not fully meeting the needs of students or substitutes.

Substitutes made several consistent comments, including a desire for increased training days, visits to schools, more classroom techniques, an opportunity to hear full-time substitutes talk about what is actually successful in the classroom, as well as additional training after the initial orientation. In the spring of 2003 a committee of teachers, substitutes, administrators, and district personnel was formed. Its purpose was to review and comment on a proposed sweeping reform of substitute training in Citrus County.

The committee had an opportunity to review a document summarizing published research in substitute training as well as the opportunity to review comments and suggestions from substitutes and administrators about the training. The committee agreed to increase the substitute orientation to a 2 1/2-day orientation/training session, to be enacted by the Planning and Development Department the following school year.

The lengthened training incorporated the following changes:

Day One remains largely the same with orientation and awareness training.

Day Two includes:

- Substitute coordinators (site personnel responsible for contacting and contracting substitutes during absences)
- A rotating system of two assistant principals dealing with classroom discipline and management—one representing elementary schools, the other representing secondary schools

- A morning of classroom activities and instructional strategies
- An awareness session with Citrus County social workers on child abuse and suicide prevention
- An awareness session for creating an atmosphere of “non-confrontational confrontation”

The last 1/2-day provides a mandated opportunity for the substitutes to visit a school, or schools, of their choice. This allows substitutes the opportunity to meet administrators, the substitute coordinator, visit classrooms to observe teachers, as well as be briefed on that school's procedures for assigning and equipping their substitutes. Visiting schools also allows the substitute coordinator for the school to observe and talk with potential substitutes for the school. The 20 county schools created a staggered schedule of visiting times for their schools, allowing substitutes an opportunity to visit several schools of interest.

At the same time, the Planning and Development Department increased its expending resources in the area of substitute training. A 45-minute video interview of 4 of the county's top-rated veteran substitutes was created. The video has been assimilated into the training and is centered on a series of concerns expressed by new substitutes. Money was also budgeted for the purchase of 100 Substitute Teacher Handbooks from STI/USU. Sixty of these manuals were stored for use in the substitute orientation and training course, while the rest were distributed to substitute coordinators of each of the schools as a resource for their substitutes. The Planning and Development Department also created a substitute page on the district Web site, including information on substitute training, providing a quarterly newsletter, as well as other resources for the substitutes.

Additionally, Planning and Development hosted the first ever Substitute Coordinator Meeting held in Citrus County. Two assistant superintendents, several principals, as well as the substitute coordinators, attended this meeting. The substitute coordinators had an opportunity to express their thoughts, concerns, and frustrations with contacting and using substitutes. Suggestions brought forth by the coordinators, who associate with substitutes on a daily basis, were added to the new training program.

Year Two

As the 2003-2004 school year began, the substitute orientation and training program had a new face and an expanded *Substitute*

Handbook, designed to meet the needs of the additional training. Continued assessment of the new training indicates that as a result of the training and the visits to local school sites, a higher percentage of newly trained substitutes were hired and rehired by the schools. The data also indicate a higher level of comfort by the substitutes in the development of skills necessary to be a successful substitute teacher in the classroom. Research and data gathering were continued during the year. Data gathering methods include exit surveys by substitutes after the initial training sessions, conversations with substitute coordinators, as well as a formal survey of all substitutes. The information gathered in Citrus County indicates that our substitutes are aligned with the results of nationwide averages in a wide variety of categories. For instance, flexibility in hours is considered to be more important to our substitutes—and national averages—than the amount of money earned as a substitute.

During the year the Citrus County School Board evidenced an increased awareness of substitutes, providing a pay increase for substitutes so that the district was equivalent in its pay scale compared to districts in the state of similar size.

Year Three

The 2004-2005 school year provided additional opportunities for Citrus County's substitutes. Ideas from the July 2004 STI/USU Conference, held in Park City, Utah, were used to create a local, county-level Substitute Institute. This institute provides a number of components for additional training of our substitutes in a variety of areas. True staff development has finally arrived for Citrus County substitutes. The components were developed in accordance with the information gathered from previous surveys on the needs of the substitutes and site administrators. Among the offerings were additional trainings in classroom management, enhancing student skills in reading, and promoting effective writing in the classroom. As word spread, a number of administrators requested that substitutes be offered training in a new math curriculum the elementary schools had adopted. Training was provided for substitute teachers.

One of the initial difficulties in the Substitute Institute was in the area of communication. No district-wide communication method with all of the district's substitutes was in place. All of the initial attendees were newly trained substitutes, contacted through email addresses collected at the initial training. Word was also spread through a brochure describing the institute, which was distributed by

the site substitute coordinators. In an effort to remedy the communication issue, the district personnel office offered to include a line for an email address on the annual certificate renewal form sent to all substitutes during the spring of 2005. A copy of the email addresses was sent to Planning and Development for inclusion in the email database. Next year, communication should be much more effective between the district and the substitutes.

While attendance at the institute was initially limited to new substitutes, word slowly spread through the district, and an increasing number of experienced substitutes attended the trainings offered as the year progressed. One training a month was offered during the 2004-2005 school year. By the end of the school year, 10% of our substitutes voluntarily attended at least one of the course offerings of the Substitute Institute.

During the current year several other accomplishments were made in providing the opportunity to meet the needs of our substitutes. A grant was negotiated with the regional community college to provide encouragement and assistance to substitutes seeking an educational degree.

Planning for the future

The theme, "You can't be a babysitter any more," continues to be a driving force for the professional staff development being offered by the district Planning and Development Department. The initial three-year plan is being revisited, establishing goals for future development and data gathering with Citrus County substitutes.

What are the keys to successful improvement of substitute training in Citrus County?

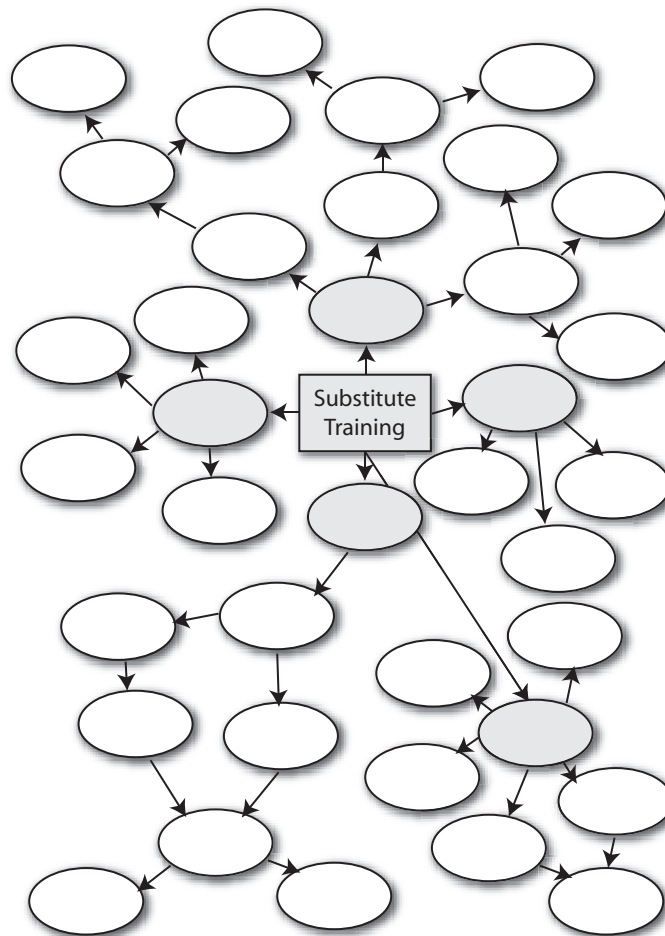
There are several:

- Develop a vision of the needs of substitutes based on the needs of students. Involve teachers, school administrators, individuals who contact substitutes, and the substitutes themselves in gathering data on perceived needs.
- Conduct research on what are the best practices for substitutes in the classroom environment.
- Involve key people at the district and site levels in decision making for change.
- Contacting the players—in Citrus County School District's case the substitute coordinators, the substitutes, the site administrators—was a crucial element in creating the buy-in

needed to change and improve the direction our training was going.

- Establish an effective communication method with the substitutes in the district.
- Constantly check on the effects of the changes being enacted.

For further information feel free to check the Citrus County School District Web site. See the substitute Web page located at: <http://www.citrus.k12.fl.us/staffdev/substitutes>



(The current district substitute program.
Oval dark areas are major topics such as Web page
and Substitute Institute. Subtopics are the clear ovals.)

Michael Ballard has been in the field of education for 33 years, and is currently a resident of Citrus County, Florida. He was born in Iowa, raised in Illinois, spent a two-year stint in the Army overseas, then moved to Florida when offered a teaching position. He and his wife celebrated their 25th wedding anniversary this year in June, and have four children (three boys, one girl), and one granddaughter, with another grandchild on the way. Mike was the school nominee for Teacher of the Year three times, the Citrus County Teacher of the Year, and nominated for the Florida Association of Social Studies Teacher of the Year twice. While teaching social studies for 30 years at Crystal River High School, he was noted for innovative teaching techniques and involvement with students. Mike moved to work with staff development in the district office in 2002, and currently facilitates not only substitute training, but also National Board process, the New Teacher Induction Program, Teacher Education council, administrates for two online training programs, operates on various committees, conducts various trainings, and coordinates professional development districtwide.