

Screening Substitute Teachers

By Mark Kakkuri

The Substitute Teacher Paradox

The theory behind temporarily replacing a full-time teacher is simple enough: a substitute teacher takes the full-time teacher's place. However, the practicality of finding a substitute teacher presents something of a paradox at times.

In an ideal world, only fully qualified — for some school districts, that means degreed, state-certified, and experienced — substitute teachers take a full-time teacher's place. But school districts sometimes have to find a qualified substitute on very short notice. Some argue that the immediate, real-world need of having a substitute in that classroom when the bell rings — if, for nothing else, just to keep the peace — takes precedence over the previous ideal-world qualifications. Add to this the present dilemma of a nationwide teacher shortage and one can begin to understand the challenges that school districts face almost every day.

The assumption that no school district, teacher, parent, or student would want an unqualified substitute teacher in charge of a class leads to the premise that screening substitute teacher candidates is absolutely necessary. The generally short notice coupled with a nationwide shortage of teachers can not be used as a crutch for placing unqualified substitute teachers in classrooms.

The Screening Solution

Education experts say the screening process a school district uses in hiring substitute teachers is critical to striking the difficult balance between required qualifications and immediate need. While virtually everyone associated with the field of education would say that screening substitute teachers is necessary, it is difficult to find agreement beyond that. To some, "screening" is making sure a substitute teacher candidate is not a felon. To others, screening means ensuring that a candidate holds an education degree and appropriate classroom management skills.

Typically, screening involves at least one of the following: pre-screening, paper and pencil screening, interviews, and background checks. Each of these screening methods is used to different degrees according to state laws, school district policies, or administrator preference.

Pre-Screening

Pre-screening involves determining if a substitute teacher

candidate is employable. This covers aspects such as obtaining proof of a candidate's U.S. citizenship, verifying the candidate's education/training, reviewing his or her employment record, and asking candidates if they have any criminal charges that would preclude employment. Pre-screening may also include finding out if the candidate has any relatives who already work in the same school district and — since many substitute teachers are notified of positions to fill via automated calling systems — if the candidate has a touch-tone phone.

Paper and Pencil Screening

Once a substitute teacher candidate is deemed employable, he or she may undergo a “paper and pencil” screening, a quick assessment of teaching abilities. A paper and pencil screening should be less than 20 yes-or-no type answers, self- or computer-administered, and easily evaluated (pass/fail). This screening may also include having the candidate submit a writing sample, solve mathematical problems, or demonstrate computer skills.

Interviews

Beyond pre-screening and paper and pencil screening, interviews provide answers to questions about candidates that may not show up otherwise. Because of the intangible “human factors” that can only arise in an interpersonal encounter, some experts argue that this is the best way to determine whether a candidate is worthy of hire. Interviews may be one-on-one or a group setting and can be used to determine a candidate's professional appearance, communication skills, and on-the-spot problem-solving skills. Although intangible “human factors” are, by definition, difficult to measure, structured interviews can qualify a candidate's answers with ratings such as “below average,” “average,” and “above average” and help solidify evaluations.

Background Checks

Background checks include investigating a candidate's personal and professional references, obtaining medical clearance, and determining the presence of any criminal record. Time-consuming and expensive, this aspect of screening is usually reserved only for those who have passed the other screens. Background checks are sometimes required by state law, district policy, or simply because a school administrator's experience or professional judgment deems it worthwhile.

Background checks may include investigating a candidate's character references, experience with previous employers, experience with jobs involving student contact, or other principal or educator references. Medically, a background check ensures that a

candidate is physically suited for the job by obtaining a doctor's clearance, a self-report form, tuberculosis testing, and/or drug and alcohol testing. Evidence of criminal records can be researched through local and state law enforcement agencies as well as nationally through the Federal Bureau of Investigation.

Guidelines

Dr. Milli Blackman, director of the Principal's Center at Harvard University's Graduate School of Education, says school districts should continually ask, "What's best for the kids?" "That's really the summation of screening for me," she says. "Administrators should ask, 'What kind of quality do we want to maintain every single teaching day?' and work from that." Blackman also suggests starting the screening process with an investigation of a substitute teacher candidate's criminal background, rather than waiting until the end to do it.

Many schools try to retain a pool of qualified substitute teachers that can be tapped when needed. The pool of substitute teachers is fully screened — using most or all of the screening techniques — in advance, allowing school administrators to do nothing more than make a phone call when a teacher is needed. Although still somewhat of a hit and miss process because of timing, availability, and the fact that the substitute teacher pool may only consist of a few qualified teachers, many schools have found this method somewhat satisfactory.

Some temporary staffing companies have begun to hire and place substitute teachers in schools, making the necessary screening of candidates a part of a staffing solution. Although schools will end up paying slightly more for these substitute teachers, the temporary staffing companies virtually eliminate the administrative burden of recruiting, screening, and hiring substitute teachers.

In conclusion, screening substitute teachers is necessary to ensure that only high-quality teachers are allowed in classrooms. By using the screening techniques mentioned here — or, by having a temporary staffing company handle the recruiting, screening, and hiring — school districts will ensure that students receive an excellent education.

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