

The Journey of an Education Service Center into the Development of an Effective Substitute Teacher Training Program

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Education Service Center (ESC) Region 12 in Waco, Texas trained its first substitutes in the summer of 2003. This program began based on the belief that training quality substitute teachers will enhance student achievement. The ESC vision statement is, "To be the provider of choice for education services and solutions." Building upon this vision statement, the goal for the Substitute Teacher Training Program is, "To train participants to be quality substitutes, to insure student learning is seamless." The substitute training is offered semiannually prior to the fall and spring semesters. To date, approximately 700 substitute teachers have been trained.

Hence, the typical scenario is that a substitute is called to teach a class, but given no training. This is as common for the majority of school districts in Texas as it is in the entire nation. The Texas Education Code, under which school districts operate, offers no statutes that govern substitute teachers. Therefore, the requirements, training, and qualifications of substitute teachers are up to the discretion of each independent school district or local education agency (LEA), and are as varied and independent as the school districts themselves.

ESC Region 12 encompasses 11,318 square miles, serves 12 counties, 78 LEA's, 11 charter schools, and 25 private schools. The majority of ESC Region 12's LEA's do not have the time or resources to train a substitute; their primary hope is that the substitute can maintain discipline in the classroom.

In the spring of 2003, ESC Region 12 began investigating the needs and statistics for developing a substitute teacher program, and found the following:

- On any given school day, up to 10% of the nation's classrooms have substitute teachers (Abdal-Haqq, 1997)
- Fifty-three percent of districts nationwide provide no training (Longhurst, 2000)

- Of districts that do train, only 10% of school districts provide more than 2 hours of training (Longhurst, 2000)

Based on this research and survey data from regional school districts, ESC Region 12 decided to begin developing a substitute teacher training program.

Development of an Effective Substitute Teacher Training Program

In preparing the training program for substitutes, ESC Region 12 discovered several issues regarding substitutes. First, a substitute tends to be treated as a marginal member of the education community. Rarely do students, teachers or administrators regard substitutes as full professionals who meet accepted standards of practice. Substitutes frequently do not see themselves as professionals. Classroom management is cited as the greatest challenge faced by substitutes (Abdal-Haqq, 1997).

Often students believe that a day with a substitute is a day to misbehave. Other problems include incomplete or missing lesson plans, unfamiliarity with school or district policies, and a lack of knowledge of legal issues. The low priority school districts traditionally place on substitutes and their training is indicative of the poor attitude of both students and fellow teachers. The same problems were documented 50 years ago, and the solutions appear as elusive as ever (Abdal-Haqq, 1997).

Armed with this research, ESC Region 12 selected the STI/USU substitute training curriculum, which is research based on sound educational content, and is a result of a U.S. Department of Education grant. The program was called the Substitute Teacher Educational Program Initiative (STEP-IN). The six components in this training curriculum include:

- Teaching and Instructional Strategies
- Being Prepared and Professional
- Legal and First Aid Issues
- Classroom Management & Behavior
- The Use of Fill in Activities
- Creation of a SubPack or Resource Kit (Longhurst, 2000)

Who is a Substitute and Why Do They Substitute?

Identification of the market audience was ESC Region 12's next challenge. As an education service center, the market audience had been limited exclusively to LEA's, administrators, and teachers. The challenge was to develop marketing strategies reaching a new

audience; the individual outside the school world. Knowing who would be interested in becoming a substitute and be willing to pay for substitute training was also needed. Another “need to know” was the expectations LEA’s had for a trained substitute.

In reviewing these questions, ESC Region 12 discovered that individuals substitute for a variety of reasons. Additional income is one motivation, such as a stay at home mom with children in school. Persons interested in becoming teachers want to substitute teach to see if they enjoy teaching. They also want to gain experience and make contacts that might lead to permanent full-time positions (Abdal-Haqq, 1997). Another audience is retired teachers, who want to be in the classroom but do not want daily responsibilities of permanent teachers. To be an effective teacher and the ability to manage a classroom was the common thread that each person surveyed shared as a concern in being a substitute teacher (Abdal-Haqq, 1997). Another interesting item to note of persons attending substitute training are those who work with children in other roles, such as ministers, child care workers, and lawyers.

Substitutes are not in it for the money. In 1989 a study found the average compensation for substitutes to be \$45 to \$55 per day, depending on the school district and local funds. Sadly, these daily rates are still accurate in ESC Region 12. Larger LEA’s pay a higher rate, but require a minimum of 60 college hours to be a substitute in their district. According to Abdal-Haqq (1997), relatively few individuals work as substitutes more than a year and even fewer make a career of it. Therefore, the substitute pool is constantly shifting and school districts need to replenish their supply of effective substitutes.

Marketing a Substitute Teacher Training Program

ESC Region 12 developed a flyer for circulation and a press release. Since marketing barriers included targeting persons outside the traditional school realm and informing school districts of the training, flyers were distributed to superintendents outlining the topics and dates of training in various areas of Region 12. The press release was sent to every newspaper office throughout the region. Due to the vast size of Region 12, the substitute training program was taken “on the road” to various sites to better serve schools.

With limited funds for marketing the program, the communications coordinator at ESC Region 12 diligently acquired TV spots, sent out press releases, and contacted the major newspapers in the region to visit the actual training sites and conduct interviews. ESC Region 12 secured free publicity for approximately 18 months.

Even with this limited level of marketing, the remarkably high response of both individuals and LEA's indicated the need and desire for quality training.

In the second stage of marketing, the target audience became school districts. A brochure was developed listing the benefits for potential substitutes and school administrators, along with highlights of the impact quality substitutes have on students. The brochure was designed to "sell" to individuals interested in becoming substitutes and to school districts interested in having trained substitutes. This marketing package is currently being used in newspapers, mail-out brochures, and television advertisement.

A third segment of the marketing program is the ESC Region 12 Substitute Teacher Web page. The Substitute Teacher page is one of the most frequently visited on ESC 12's Web site. Inquiries come from across Texas and other states as well. For individuals who want to register online, a registration system designed specifically for substitutes is available. Development of this system was dictated by the fact that the normal online registration process was geared strictly toward educators. Substitute teacher registrations can be downloaded, mailed, emailed, faxed, or completed during a phone call. This is a stopgap measure until ESC improves its registration system to accommodate the new market of individuals.

Evolution of Substitute Teacher Training Program

As the reputation of the ESC Region 12's substitute training grew, another unanticipated phenomenon evolved. Several school districts from Region 12 and beyond began to contract with ESC Region 12 to present customized substitute training to their districts at their sites. In addition to the onsite training requests, trained substitutes requested ongoing education for themselves. Through surveys, observations, and evaluations, ESC Region 12 believes an evolution of their Substitute Teacher Training Program will encompass the following:

- Training in an LEA, charging a fee for one-day trainings (number of participants must be limited)
- Establishing a continuous contract to train substitutes for LEA's on a semiannual basis
- Offering a trainer-of-trainer to LEA's for their substitute training programs
- Offering training to the public on a per semester time line

- Offering training at a site location with an LEA paying a workshop fee for their potential substitute applicants to attend, and allowing additional individuals to attend at their personal expense
- Offering training that requires the LEA's substitute applicants to attend ESC 12's substitute teacher training on their own time and at their personal expense

One of the newspaper articles in the *Waco Tribune Herald*, on July 2, 2004, resulted in a related article in the *Association of Texas Professional Educators* (ATPE) fall edition of 2004 entitled, "Class clowns beware." The focus of the article was the ability of trained substitutes to manage the unruly student. This article generated many requests from LEA's outside ESC's regional boundaries concerning the substitute training program. ESC Region 12 determined that a consistent quality substitute training program across the state of Texas was eminent. The 20 Regional Education Service Centers (RESC's) are basically the same except for the demographics or location of the RESC. As a part of ESC Region 12's vision for quality and consistent substitute teacher training, and the apparent need and desire for trained substitutes, they developed a trainer-of-trainer model and offered it to each of the 20 RESC's in April 2005.

The goal with a trainer-of-trainer for RESC's was to develop a consistent, quality substitute training program throughout the state. Since ESC Region 12's curriculum is based on the STI/USU model, Blaine Sorenson of STI/USU was invited to participate in training RESC trainers. Mr. Sorenson informed participants of the research used to develop the STI/USU program, and offered his expertise as a trainer across the United States.

In this statewide training ESC Region 12 reviewed the materials from STI/USU and presented the research for the development of the program. Once the research segment was complete, Region 12 focused on the need for consistency in the Substitute Training Program statewide. To accomplish this vision, they presented the following:

- Substitute Teacher Training is taught with the same curriculum and is consistent with the length of training throughout the state
- Materials and certificates are consistent throughout the program
- Marketing of the program is uniform
- Having "product" recognition across the state for Substitute

Teacher Training should be much like recognition of the “golden arches”

The Future of ESC 12's Substitute Program

To maintain a high-quality, effective program, and to fulfill the expectations of substitutes, an evaluation is completed at the end of each training session. The results of these evaluations will become initiatives that will drive ESC Region 12's program as it continues to evolve. These initiatives include:

- Staff development training for teachers and administrators at the district where the substitute has received training
- Half-day workshops that focus on one of the main topics covered in the original full-day training
- Substitute evaluation training for administrators

State Laws are Changing

The primary requirement the state of Texas imposes for substitutes is that each LEA must have a background check for every substitute. The mandatory requirement of the No Child Left Behind Act for professional development for teachers contributes to teacher absenteeism, which in turn contributes to the greater need for quality substitutes. Student achievement, to a large degree, depends on the continuity of instruction. As mentioned earlier, on any given school day, up to 10% of the nation's classrooms have substitute teachers (Abdal-Haqq, 1997). In highly impacted schools, at-risk students are spending closer to 13.5% of the school year with a substitute teacher (Hawkins, 2000), which almost equals two years of their K-12 education. Is it a matter of time before Texas Legislature determines that substitutes must have training? If so, then Education Service Center Region 12 will be one step ahead to ensure that effective education is seamless when a substitute teacher is in the classroom.

Vision for ESC 12 Substitute Teacher Training Program

ESC Region 12's substitute training program is significantly successful. Trainees leave the training with confidence and the capability to handle classroom instruction and classroom management. However, as with any quality program, Region 12 is continuing to research ways to enhance their program. The next objective is to offer staff development that will train administrators and teachers in utilizing substitute teachers. This training will include developing a quality substitute folder to extend the continuity of lessons and maintain discipline in the classroom. When substitutes

were asked what they want from classroom teachers, their response was:

. . . good lesson plans with clear and thorough instructions and an explicit and well-structured discipline system. One substitute described a good situation: “Good lesson plans and the names of students I could count on. Detailed lesson plans with all the materials needed readily available. Included in the lesson plans are the teacher’s discipline policies, lavatory procedure and so on (Henderson, Protheroe, and Porch, 2002)

ESC Region 12’s training will also impress upon administrators that evaluations for substitutes are just as important as for regular teachers. Convincing administrators and teachers that lessons can be carried on effectively by competent substitutes will bring full circle the seamless quality education that children deserve.

References

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