

# Using Permanent Site-Based Substitute Teachers to Improve Student Achievement and School Environment: A Case Analysis

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## Abstract

The administration at Oak Canyon Junior High in Lindon, Utah has created an effective substitute teacher system to combat the challenges of traditional substitute placement by using permanent, site-based substitutes. Oak Canyon Junior H.S. employs 55 teachers and has a student population of 1,460. This paper looks at this school's substitute system which truly benefits students, teachers, administrators, and substitute teachers.

## Challenges of the Traditional System

There are many difficulties engendered by the 'here today, gone tomorrow' model for substitute assignment. Substitutes, permanent teachers, students, and administrators all suffer because of some of the side-effects of placing substitutes almost at random in schools and classrooms.

In the traditional model, substitute teachers are generally isolated in their work. Rarely do they have the chance to collaborate with other teachers or other substitutes to talk about how to improve their work. With such a lack of connection between individuals, it is no wonder the struggle to promote longevity in the substitute ranks in a traditional substitute teacher system is so great.

The traditional system causes problems for teachers as well. Many teachers are reluctant to leave a substantive lesson plan because they do not know who will take their class, or whether or not that individual will have the expertise or the gumption to actually teach it. Therefore, the students again suffer when the regular teacher is gone because the teacher often leaves nothing meaningful for the students to do. In addition, because teachers do not trust the substitute system, oftentimes they will come to school sick rather than call for a sub because the hassle is more trouble than it is worth. Those days are less meaningful for students as well, because the teacher lacks the strength to teach effectively.

Administrators are also inconvenienced at times by a traditional substitute system. Increased discipline issues and making sure each classroom is staffed everyday are major concerns for administrators. On days when many substitutes are in demand, desperation often results in the assignment of less-used and less-prepared substitute teachers just to keep an adult in the classroom. Another downside for administrators is that they rarely know anything about the substitutes in their building.

The end result of these difficulties, however, is the most damaging; students are not given a real chance to learn. Whether promoting poor student behavior, lack of lesson plans or lack of connection, traditional systems have fallen short in their goal of providing continuous and reliable instruction in the classroom.

### **One Possible Solution**

Oak Canyon Junior High developed a permanent, site-based substitute system that has addressed most of the major downfalls of the traditional substitute program. It is called the Student Assistance Center (SAC). The SAC was started ten years ago, and has been refined for the last seven years under Principal Paul Olson. The result is an entity that truly serves the students, teachers, administrators, and the substitute teachers

The SAC consists of a coordinator and eight aides whose function is to cover classes when teachers are absent and support other school functions when possible. Located in a classroom in the school, the SAC is accessible to teachers, administration, and students. When an absence occurs in the school, the SAC coordinator assigns an aide to cover the class. If an aide is not used in the classroom during the day, the aide will be assigned to accomplish other important tasks for the school.

One of the key reasons for SAC success is the excellent quality and the longevity of both the coordinator and the aides. The coordinator, Brenda, has been with the SAC since the school opened ten years ago, and she does a phenomenal job. She is proactive and organized. She coordinates the classes that need substitutes each day and assigns the best aide for the situation. The aides themselves have an average of almost five years with the school. Many of them have content area expertise. For example, one of our aides is competent to teach almost any level of math in the school. Another aide is very comfortable and competent in the Applied Technology Education (ATE) classrooms.

**Benefits**

Students benefit in many ways because of the SAC. They have less opportunity to be off task when one of the aides is substituting because the SAC aides know the students and are not educational nomads that students may never see again. Students know that this is not a “one-time substitute sighting.” Knowing they will definitely see the same substitute on any given day in any given class, students understand that traditional substitute torture is not in their best interest. This system also benefits students because of increased attention when the teacher is in the classroom. Because nine teachers are not typically gone every day, there are many days that aides can assist a teacher in the classroom and give students more one-on-one help.

The SAC system also works well for the aides who do the substituting. One benefit is that they get to come to the same place every day and they are guaranteed work. Instead of being randomly assigned to schools, they have consistency. In cases other than sickness, they even know ahead of time whose class they will be taking the next day, and can therefore consult with the teacher to clarify curriculum and discuss student needs. Also, built into the system is a substitute support group. Each aide has eight other aides that they can learn from, bounce ideas off of, and talk to about challenges or successes in the classroom. Another benefit for the aides is flexibility. As mentioned before, they have the guarantee of work every day, but they also have the flexibility of taking time off when they need it. It is rare for nine teachers to be out of the building at the same time.

The benefits teachers receive from the SAC are also impressive. Because teachers have substitutes they can trust, they are more likely to leave meaningful lessons. Teachers also benefit by the many tasks performed by the aides when they are not substituting (see List 1). The aides help teachers do everything from laminating classroom materials, testing kids who missed exams, and entering scores into the computer for teachers. The list of things they do to help teachers is extensive.

Easy accessibility to substitutes also has benefits for teachers. It is not a big deal for a teacher to get one period off to take a sick child to the doctor, or to go home halfway through the day because they are too sick to teach. The downside is that sometimes it is too easy to get a substitute, and so teachers may get a substitute when they otherwise would have just finished teaching for the day.

Administrators are beneficiaries to this program as well. As List 1 shows, the aides do so much to help improve the school climate as well as help the school run smoothly. For example, the SAC also serves as the in-school suspension room and lunch detention location. SAC aides are crucial in monitoring halls during lunch and class breaks. Also, given their number, they can complete projects and tasks that would take a single administrator or secretary hours or days to complete. Examples include test or newsletter organization and distribution.

**List 1: Various jobs done by the SAC aides when they are not substituting**

Running errands	Entering grades/scores for teachers
Typing tests and worksheets for teachers	Bulletin boards
Laminating	Correcting tests and papers
In-school deliveries (report cards, pictures, etc)	Help with picture day
Help with hearing and vision screening	Clean/organize storage areas
Textbook removal	Hall monitoring/crowd control
Lunch duty	Tardy program for school
Matting art for teachers	Selling promotions (Val-o-grams)
Tutoring	Library help
Security camera help	Classroom aide
Math counts coach	Assistant coaching
Inventory help	<i>Organizational tasks</i>
Help with parent-teacher conf.	Academic tracking
Phoning parents	Absentee testing
Assist counseling office	General computer help
Help with career day	Main office substitute
Art projects for teachers	Photo copying
Create lesson plans for subbing	Coloring projects
Visual aids	Lunch detention
In-school suspension	Binding books
Distribute yearbooks and refunds	General upkeep of teacher lounge
Giving oral tests to accommodated students	Dark room
Organize and distribute state and other testing	Summer mailings
Help with registration	Stamp and cover textbooks
Clean an organize art supplies	Help sell P.E. Uniforms
Help with life skills students	Help with locker cleanout

The SAC has had some other peripheral benefits. The school hired three excellent teachers who had their start in the SAC. After working in the SAC, they decided to get a degree and/or a teaching certificate and were brought on as full-time teachers.

### **Funding**

The main obstacle to creating a system like the SAC is cost. Putting it together required hard work and creativity. Any school choosing to create this type of system would have to find their own unique way of funding it. Some schools may have similar funding sources as those in the Alpine School District, but most will find their situation more than a little different. Nevertheless, as far as helping the school run smoothly and benefiting all the stakeholders in this venture, this is some of the best-spent money in the school. Finding funding is worth the effort it takes.

The SAC coordinator position is funded through using one of the administrative assistant contracts assigned to the school. In Alpine School District, junior high schools are assigned two secretarial contracts per year. The SAC coordinator is given one those positions. By doing this, the coordinator works a few more hours every day than an hourly person might, which allows her to be in the SAC before and after school. Because this is a contract position with better pay, retention of the coordinator is easier.

Each aide costs the school about \$9,000 per year, minus days they take off. Most of the aides do take some time off, so realistically the cost for each aide is around \$8,500. Thus the cost of the eight aides in the SAC cost the school about \$68,000 per year.

Here is a breakdown of how we obtain that money. \$9,000 comes from the district allotment of one campus aide per year. The substitute teacher allotment for our school brings in another \$20,000 per year. Additionally, each year we have a small amount of full-time employee (FTE) savings. For example, if we are allotted 55.4 FTE's, rather than hire a four-tenths teacher, we would take the savings and use it to help fund the SAC. By doing this another \$21,000 per year is applied towards the SAC. The counseling department funds most of one of the aides to help in the counseling office. The school funds the rest with the understanding that when the school is in a pinch for substitutes, their aide will be placed in one of the classrooms for the day. Other sources include the small amount of money we receive to help with lunch supervision, reimbursement for district-sponsored events that require substitutes, and a few smaller funding sources that

help the overall price tag. Provided below is a brief summary of how we fund the SAC.

<b><u>Source</u></b>	<b><u>Approximate Amount</u></b>
District-Funded Campus Aide	\$9,000
District Money for Substitutes	\$20,000
FTE Savings	\$21,000
Counseling ( <i>Comprehensive Guidance</i> )	\$8,000
Lunch Supervision Money	\$1,500
Substitute Reimbursement ( <i>District-Sponsored Events</i> )	<u>\$2,000</u>
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>\$61,500</b>

These sources mostly fund the program each year. Some of these sources vary from year to year, so projecting funding and actual cost can be a bit tricky. Some years other money must be found to make it function fully. Nevertheless, it is such a valuable asset to our school that ways are always found to make it work.

### **Conclusions**

All things considered, benefits to the SAC system far outweigh using our district's substitute system. Despite the cost, having a substitute teacher force that is part of the school family instead of being the educational orphan is incredibly valuable to bridging the gap between schools and substitutes.

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