

No Substitute Left Behind

Because substitute teachers have a big impact on student learning, principals must engage them to reach their potential.

Kevin O'Connor

Schools and districts routinely recruit, retain, and support highly qualified teachers to ensure that students receive the best learning opportunities. However, even if your school employs highly qualified full-time teachers, it is important to acknowledge that substitute teachers also have a significant impact on the education of students. What percentage of your school's total annual student attendance days is under the care and teaching of substitute teachers? The overall guidance given to substitute teachers, including professional development and the acknowledgement and assessment of their performance, is negligible.

A smiling female teacher with dark hair, wearing a yellow V-neck sweater over a white collared shirt and tan pants. She is holding a piece of white chalk in her right hand and a green eraser in her left hand. She stands in front of a black chalkboard with some faint white writing. The chalkboard is mounted on a wooden frame. In the background, there are colorful educational cards or posters on a wall with numbers 68 through 86 visible at the top.

Teacher

In his 2006 study, *Substitute Teachers as Effective Classroom Instructors*, Andrew Gary Glatfelter observed the following characteristics:

- Between kindergarten and grade 12, students in American public schools spend on average the equivalent of one school year with a substitute teacher;
- Educational background requirements for substitute teacher certification in many states are the equivalent of a high school diploma;
- Substitute teacher training is minimal and often does not include curriculum, management, or teacher effectiveness;
- Many classroom teachers contribute to substitute teacher ineffectiveness through minimal planning, absence of clarity in their plans, and their belief that substitute teachers lack skills;
- Substitute teachers can negatively impact student learning, especially in classrooms that have a high frequency of using such teachers; and
- The performance of substitute teachers can be positively affected by paying attention to basic needs that include a sense of knowledge of the school setting, friendship and acceptance as part of a school team, and recognition for the work they do.

One of the responsibilities of the principal is to bring out the best in substitute teachers. With high demands already placed on principals to ensure the quality of teaching staff, there are ways principals can monitor and improve the quality of overall substitute teacher performance.

Principal Interaction and Involvement

As a principal, I developed a routine that allowed me to enhance my interactions with the substitute teachers employed in our building. Upon arriving at the building each morning, I learned who would be substituting that day and, at minimum, I would greet the substitute teachers when they arrived in

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the office. If I did not have time before the school day began, I made time to meet each substitute teacher in his or her classroom as early in the day as possible. Even on mornings when my other responsibilities interfered, I endeavored to get to the substitute’s classroom at some point during the day. The end of the school day, even dismissal, was not too late.

My initial interaction with substitute teachers was usually brief, consisting of me welcoming each of them to the building and thanking them for coming. I asked if they found the materials and information they needed and if there was any way I could provide assistance. I wanted each substitute to feel comfortable, have an increased knowledge about the classroom and school setting, and have the confidence to start and proceed with his or her responsibilities for the day. My goal was to extend myself and to represent our school in a welcoming manner. I interacted this way not only with newcomers, but with veteran substitute teachers because they might not have been familiar with our school, an individual teacher’s routine, a particular grade level, or schedule changes or events that were occurring that day.

The initial greeting and interaction was sometimes all I could do on a particular day. But in many cases, I would visit the substitute teacher’s class during my walks around the building. Often, the information I gathered let me know if the substitute teacher would be a candidate for future positions. Whether or not I was available for the morning greeting, our secretary would also welcome substitute teachers to the office and escort them to their assigned class-

rooms, asking questions similar to those I would have asked. I also encouraged our teaching staff, all of whom were given daily the names and positions of substitute teachers who were in the building, to reach out and welcome them. Involving staff and teachers helped to initiate a congenial atmosphere and introduced the substitute teachers to the school setting.

After a 21-year career as a principal, I retired and have worked periodically as a substitute teacher. However, principals in the schools to which I’m assigned rarely interact with me. Consequently, these principals are missing opportunities to increase the potential of learning for the students at their schools.

Once while I was on assignment as a substitute, the teacher from the classroom next door stopped in my classroom twice during the day. Even though I was provided with excellent plans and had become familiar with that particular building, this teacher’s inquiries gave me additional assurance and support. When the principal, secretary, and teaching staff reach out to a substitute teacher, it lets substitute teachers know that they are recognized as part of the school team.

The Substitute Experience

On numerous occasions when I was a principal, substitute teachers remarked to me that they were pleasantly surprised that I greeted them in the morning and visited their classrooms while they conducted lessons. One substitute teacher observed that “the positive attitude of the staff and their collective willingness to reach out to me has enabled me to be more assured in the work I do.” The substitute teachers also were impressed that someone from our office staff would escort them to the classroom in the morning. They said that our school provided what they felt was a “welcome service,” an effort they did not experience at many other schools.

Another substitute teacher explained that students notice principals’ classroom visits and interactions with the substitute teachers. “I think that sends a message to the students that the principal supports the substitute and works with them. I feel that your interactions with me as a

substitute have helped me to maintain the order and discipline that allows me to more easily implement the plans left by the classroom teacher.”

As a result of my recent experience as a substitute teacher, I now share the views of those substitutes. Even with more than 30 years of experience in education and my natural comfort in a school setting, I feel much more welcomed and prepared for my day when a principal greets me and office personnel do more than hand me a room key and provide a map of the school and verbal directions to the classroom.

The Benefits

The influence of principal and school faculty and staff interactions with substitute teachers can extend beyond the classroom to which the substitute is assigned. When a substitute is made to feel part of a school community and culture, a ripple effect of benefits is created:

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- Comfort with students and their academic, social, and behavioral needs;
- Increased willingness of substitute teachers to reach out to others on the staff to ask questions, learn more about the school, and feel more engaged;
- Improved ability for substitute teachers to learn about and use the supplied curriculum and lesson plans, providing an improved probability for instructional continuity;
- Enhanced familiarity with the build-

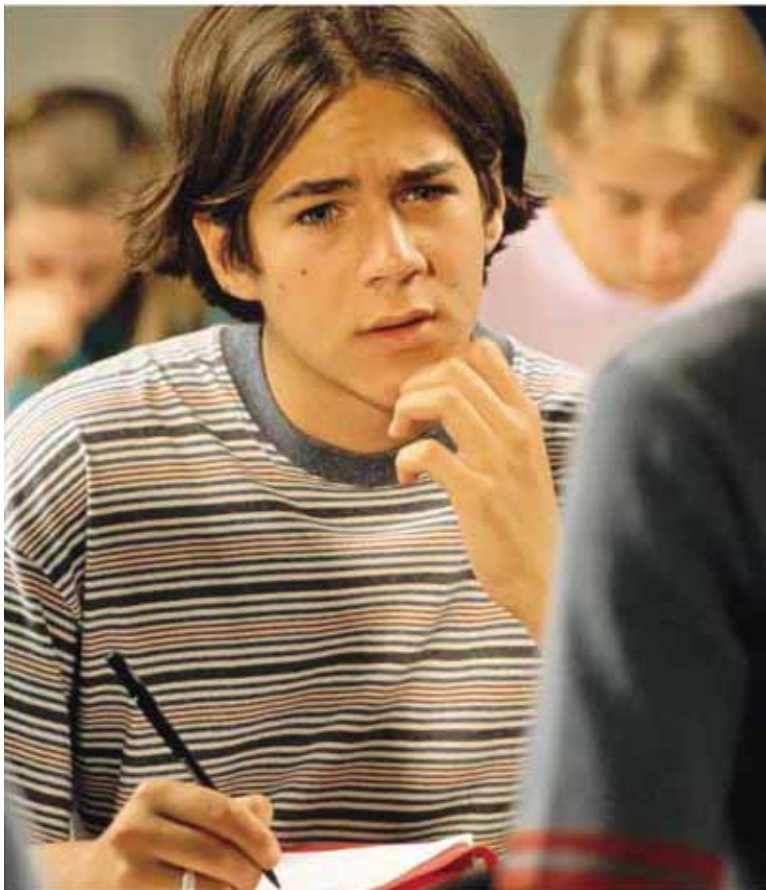
ing, the locations of exits, and areas of use and interest, all of which enhances substitute teachers’ comfort, trust, and confidence; and

- Potential for improved rapport with parents.

When students relay positive information about their substitute teachers, parents will develop more trust in the cadre of substitute teachers and the role they play in the education of their children. In this sense, the substitute teachers become more viable members of the overall school community.

Feedback and Assessment

The principal, in cooperation with the office staff, can also acquire valuable feedback about substitute teachers’ performance. The school in which I was principal developed a form that we gave to substitutes at the end of the day that asked three to four brief questions about the day’s procedures,



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the quality of the plans that were left, student concerns, and other comments. In addition, the secretary placed a feedback form in the mailbox of each classroom teacher for whom a substitute teacher had been working. The forms provided me with useful information about the performance of the substitute teacher from the teacher's point of view. Reviewing the content of these two forms, combined with other feedback from the office and school staff, helped

me to determine ways to strengthen the quality of our substitute teachers. Additionally, the compilation of feedback provided me with a method for dividing the substitute teachers into the following categories:

- Candidate for long-term substitute position;
- Candidate to recommend to other principals for substitute positions;
- Candidate is best suited for particu-

lar classrooms, all classrooms, or specialty areas;

- Candidate to be considered only on limited basis; and
- Candidate should no longer be considered for substitute teacher position.

In these times of high stakes for evaluation, assessment, and measurement, the principal role continues to broaden. In order to meet these demands, principals must bring out the best not only in their teachers, but also in their substitute teachers. It takes only a short time, but the results of your efforts will likely result in connections and influence that will affect the overall performance of your school, staff, and students. Even in the absence of uniform and extensive training for substitute teachers, principals positively influence the impact of these teachers when we provide consideration, attention, and acknowledgment for the work they do. □

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WEB RESOURCES

The Sage Advice series on Edutopia's Web site addresses how teachers can help the substitute teachers who teach their classes.

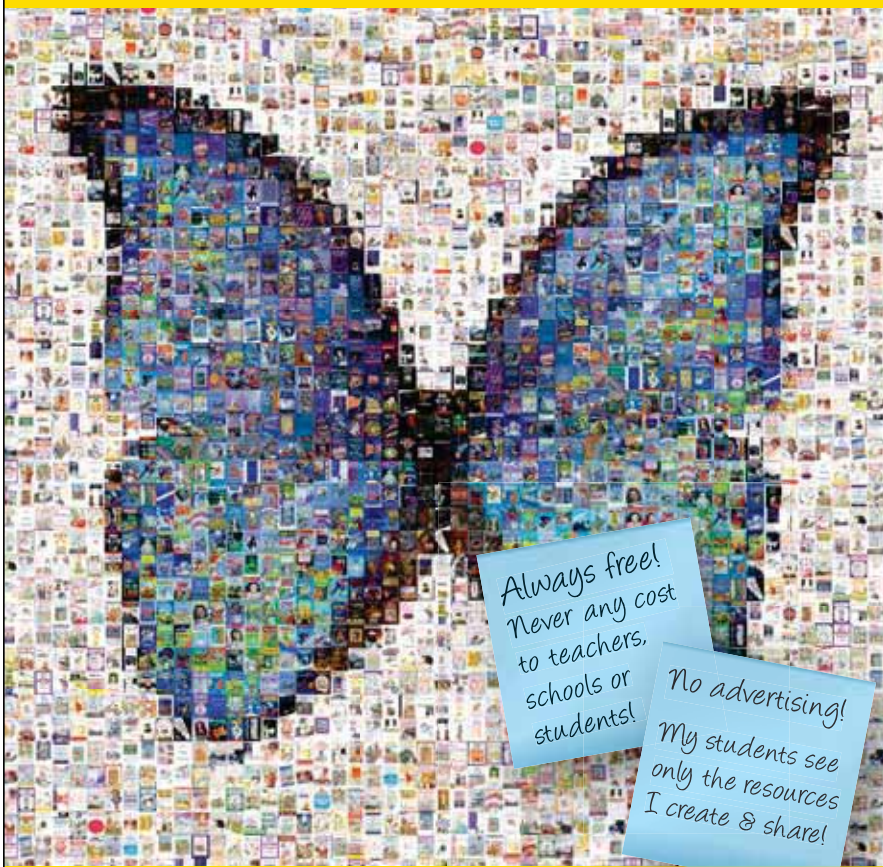
www.edutopia.org/sage-advice

This Web site provides strategies to prepare classrooms for substitute teachers and includes a sample substitute teacher feedback form.

www.interventioncentral.org/htmldocs/interventions/classroom/subtchr.php



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