Combating the Substitute Teacher Shortage with Strategic Substitute Management

Contents

Introduction: Navigating the Nationwide Sub Shortage
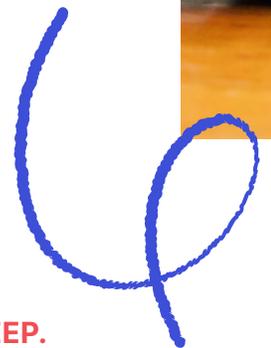
GREAT SUBSTITUTE TEACHERS ARE HARD TO FIND AND EVEN HARDER TO KEEP. More and more school districts are struggling to fill substitute teaching positions in today's gig economy. The widespread substitute teacher shortage has been magnified and exacerbated by COVID-19, which has had a drastic impact on school operations.

Now, school districts must find ways to build back better in the wake of the global health crisis. Perhaps the biggest lesson gleaned from the pandemic as it pertains to K-12 education is that we can't take our substitutes for granted. Quite simply, when you don't have enough subs to turn to in order to fill absences, you run the risk of teachers or administrators having to cover classes, educators burning out, and even the possibility of needing to shut down your entire school.
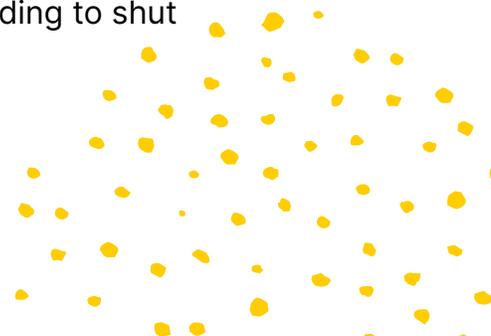
Plus, administrators are tasked with ensuring their districts not only have a sufficient number of substitutes available, but also the right information to be effective guest teachers, such as lesson plans, school policies, and classroom details.

THAT'S WHY IT'S TIME FOR K-12 TO COMPLETELY REIMAGINE SUBSTITUTE TEACHING. We need to think differently—and more comprehensively—about how we manage our substitute educators. Strategic substitute management is critical to increase fill rates and attract, engage, and retain more substitutes—but it requires the right approach and technology in order to be effective.

In this guide, we'll explore what you need to know to combat the substitute teacher shortage and improve your district's substitute management overall.

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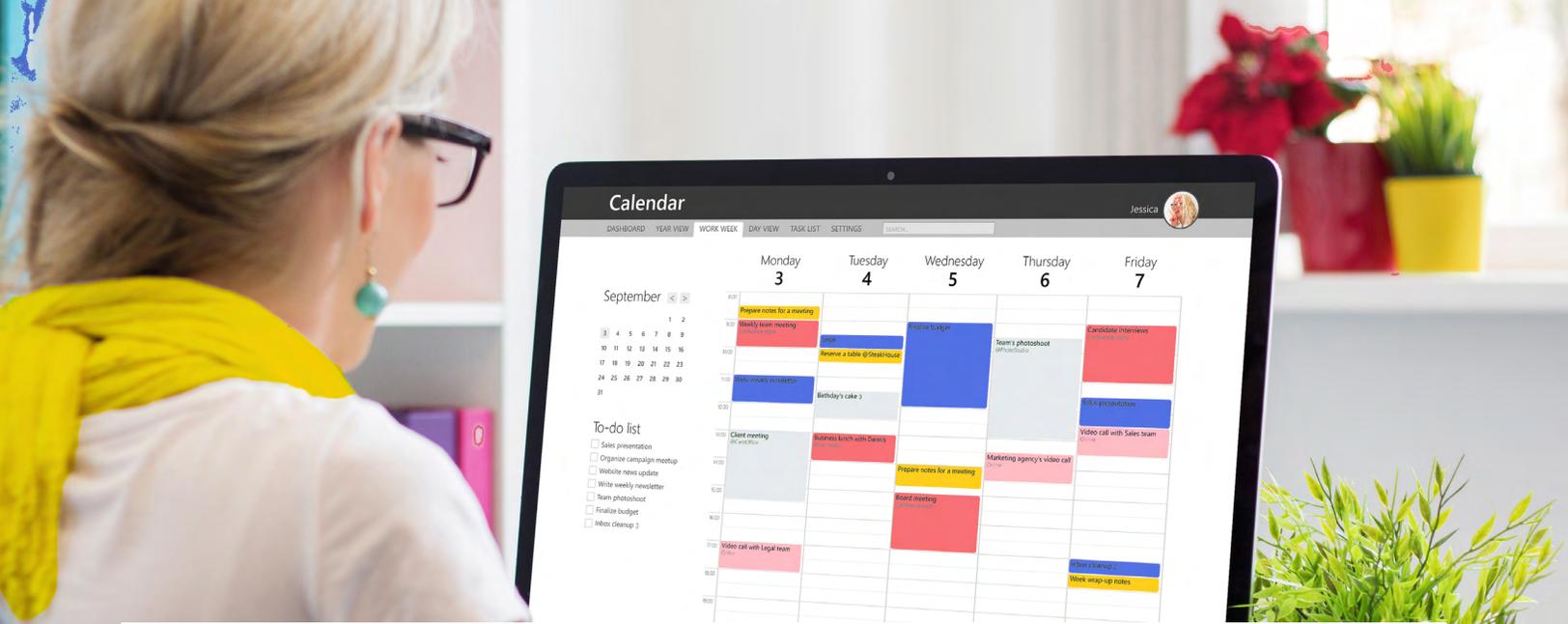
Why It's Important to Prioritize Substitute Management

Wondering why it's important to prioritize strategic substitute management in your district? According to a January 2020 EdWeek Research Center survey, the substitute fill rate is 54 percent, leading to more than 100,000 unfilled absences per day—and there are consequences for time-strapped districts.
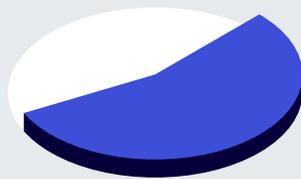
54%
Average **substitute fill rate**

100,000+
Average daily absences going **unfilled**

When schools can't fill substitute teaching positions, the classroom is directly impacted, with both student instruction and school operations suffering as a result. Inadequate staffing can result in lower student achievement, discipline issues, and loss of productivity—not to mention increased operational burden for school staff.

You know how the story goes: When absences go unfilled due to a shortage of qualified subs, teachers—as well as school staff such as counselors and principals—are distracted from normal duties. Instead of using their usual free period(s) to prepare for their own classroom instruction, many teachers are stuck covering for absent colleagues. This can lead to increased burnout among educators and contribute to The Great Resignation, a problem that's top of mind for most district administrators.

On the other hand, taking a more strategic approach to substitute management can make all the difference for teachers, staff, students, and even substitutes themselves.

Strategic substitute management helps schools to:

- **Attract, engage, and retain more substitute teachers.**
- **Enable the most qualified substitute experience(s).**
- **Ensure learning isn't disrupted or negatively impacted.**
- **Free up time for educators to spend on student learning.**

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The 3 Key Pillars of Strategic Substitute Management

The substitute teacher shortage is no doubt problematic in education today, but it's not the *only* problem; it's actually a symptom of the greater issue: taking an outdated, nonstrategic approach to substitute management.

Gone are the days of traditional, tactical approaches to improving fill rates, such as simply raising substitutes' pay or changing their educational requirements. Increasing school district fill rates doesn't just happen by itself—it requires a more thoughtful approach to substitute management supplemented by technology.

More specifically, a strategic approach to substitute management should incorporate each of the following elements: policy, culture, and technology.

1 Policy

Policy issues—or the high-level matters typically determined by the school board and/or the state's department of education—include substitute qualifications, compensation, resource planning, and more. District policies play an important role in strategic sub management and can significantly impact the quality of substitute teaching.

Kick-start your strategic substitute management policy discussions with these relevant questions:

- **How much should we pay our subs?**
- **What education must substitutes have?**
- **Should we assign "permanent subs" to particular school buildings or just maintain a pool of qualified subs?**
- **Should we consider outsourcing substitute placement to a staffing company or do so in-house??**

With these questions answered, district leaders can then help develop more granular policies and procedures at the school and district level to attract and retain more qualified substitute teachers.

Examples of different strategic substitute management policy initiatives include:

- **Developing district policies to attract and retain subs**
- **Deciding on sub compensation and requirements**
- **Creating policies for potential classroom disruptions**
- **Determining a plan for a lack of thorough lesson plans**

2 Culture

Culture is also an important piece of strategic substitute management; fostering a positive, encouraging environment and treating substitutes as valued partners is critical. In contrast with substitute policy that happens at the school board level, culture is usually in the control of central office and school building administrators.

HOW DOES CULTURE PLAY A ROLE IN STRATEGIC SUBSTITUTE MANAGEMENT?
The truth is, substitutes want to feel like they're part of the team and more of a partner to the school and classroom teacher than an understudy. Effective communication between substitutes and schools is critical to building the relationships that keep subs coming back.

To create a culture where substitutes are recognized and included, schools can share praise, offer incentives, provide enhanced learning opportunities, and explore other ways to show appreciation—but that's not where cultural improvement ends.

It's also essential to develop a school culture where substitutes not only feel valued and appreciated but also supported and prepared to step in as needed. Substitutes need easy access to assignments, lesson plans, and school-specific information in order to feel prepared for their first day of a substitute teaching gig.

Fostering a positive, encouraging environment and treating substitutes as valued partners is critical.

3 Technology

Modern substitute management technology is the indispensable third leg of the structure supporting effective substitute teaching. Great policies and culture won't amount to much if you can't effectively engage and manage substitutes when and where you need them.

Substitute management software supports and connects thoughtful policy and cultural initiatives with the robust tools needed to engage modern subs in today's evolving gig economy.

The right substitute management software can help you:

✔ **FIND QUALIFIED SUBS QUICKLY AND WITH EASE.**
Your school needs modern ways to find and engage modern, qualified substitutes. An online substitute management system can help match employee absences with subs who meet all the necessary qualifications, with ease and efficiency.

✔ **CONTACT SUBS IN REAL TIME ABOUT OPEN GIGS.**
Eighty-four percent of subs want to receive mobile phone app notifications, and 79 percent prefer text messages. The right sub management solution will allow you to reach subs in real time about available assignments via their preferred contact method.
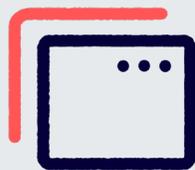
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of subs want to receive
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**STREAMLINE THE ENTIRE SUB PLACEMENT PROCESS.**
Substitute management technology also simplifies workflows throughout the entire sub placement process, providing a more modern experience for teachers and school staff and creating less hassle and confusion for subs. Plus, building administrators can easily process leave approval requests on their mobile devices.

PROVIDE THE RIGHT SUPPORT FOR SUBSTITUTES.
To keep lines of communication open and provide the right support for substitutes, you need the right technology at your disposal. This way, you can share lesson plans and school-specific information to better prepare subs for the classroom.

While modern technology helps drive strategic substitute management, it's important to keep in mind that not all solutions are created equal. Software quality matters, and certain features—such as text messaging and flexible scheduling—are imperative for improving fill rates and combating the sub shortage.
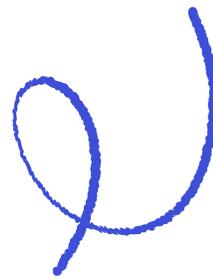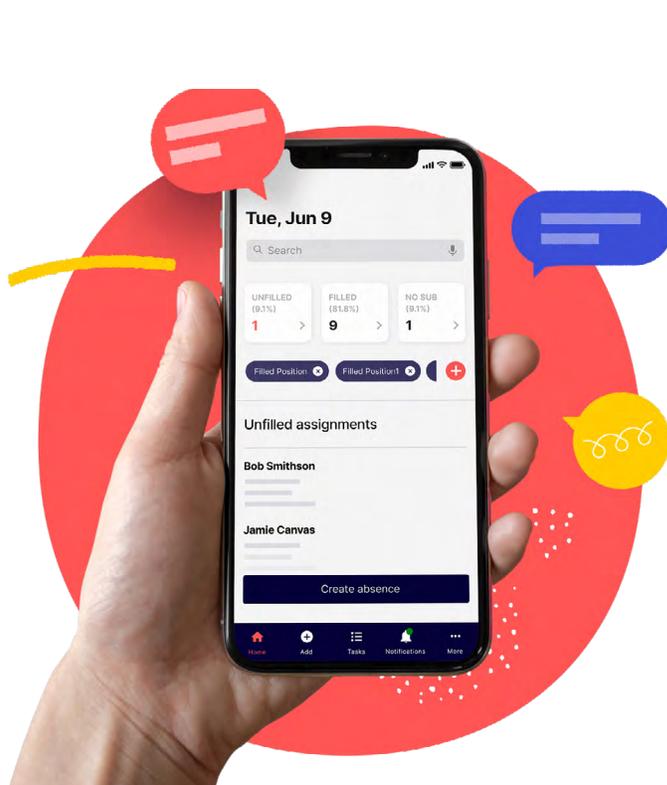
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Addressing the Sub Shortage with a Strategic Approach
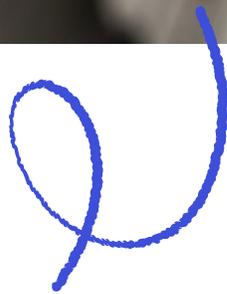
To recap, it's time for a new way of thinking about substitutes: how we hire, assess, compensate, engage, support, and ultimately retain them. The COVID-19 pandemic only further underscored substitutes' importance in K-12 education and the need for more comprehensive substitute management strategies today.

With a more modern, strategic approach to substitute management (and the right policy, culture, and technology in place to support your efforts), your district can address the sub shortage—and better attract, engage, and retain qualified substitute teachers in the process.

Are you ready to work with a partner who listens to your needs?

Bring your district into the future and tackle the substitute teacher shortage head-on with Red Rover. Our absence and substitute management system is simple to implement and learn. You can be up and running in as little as two weeks!

Learn more by scheduling a demo today.