



# 2026 National Substitute Survey Annual Report

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



# Overview

Substitute teachers are essential pillars in K-12 education. They are not just temporary fill-ins; rather, they are vital contributors to student success, and part of the front lines to maintain student learning continuity during teacher absences.

While K-12 districts may believe they have an accurate pulse on the health of their substitute teacher workforce, the reality is many factors can influence their effectiveness and job satisfaction. By understanding their profile, needs and preferences, districts can create better strategies that make it easier to attract, motivate, and retain these educators. After all, investing in a strong substitute workforce benefits everyone—students experience a consistent learning experience where they continue to excel, and districts can feel confident that education remains uninterrupted, even in a teacher's absence.

Red Rover's 2026 National Substitute Survey was created in collaboration with the **Substitute Management Advisory Council**, which is comprised of K-12 educational leaders who have a shared mission of providing resources and practical guidance to help substitute managers put strategies in place to support substitutes — from recruitment and onboarding to culture, retention and classroom impact — highlighting their crucial role in student learning. Results offer insights into today's modern substitute teacher workforce, with feedback painting a clear picture of the effectiveness of K-12 districts' current workforce management strategies and identifying key areas for improvement.



We believe every district has the opportunity to place the best educators in classrooms every day. We conducted this survey to gain a deeper understanding of the challenges that substitute teachers face nationwide, gathering vital data to empower K-12 HR managers and administrators with actionable insights to create effective strategies for enhancing their substitute workforce. The results clearly show that by adapting their strategies, K-12 districts can cultivate a stronger, sustainable substitute workforce that empowers educators and fuels student learning success.



**Dani O'Shaughnessey**  
*Co-founder and CEO of Red Rover*

The data captured from 18,328 respondents across 46 states offers visibility into the experiences, motivations, and challenges faced by substitute teachers, allowing us to share practical tips for HR leaders and administrators to strengthen their workforce management strategies and better support the needs of their substitute teachers and districts.

**18,328**

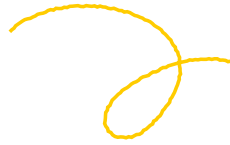
Survey Responses Across



**46**

States

# Key Findings

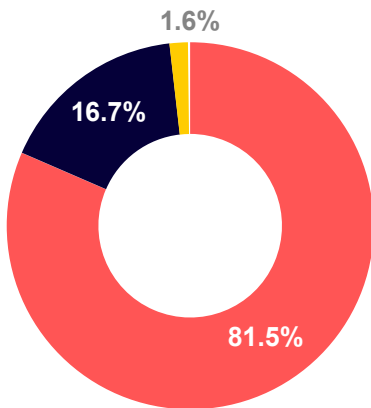


## EXPERIENCED FEMALE EDUCATORS LEAD THE POOL; YOUNGER TALENT ON THE RISE

The survey reveals that the substitute teacher workforce is predominantly female, with 81.5% identifying as women. Nearly 60% of these respondents are over 46 years old, representing more than half of the substitute workforce. They are also the most tenured. Among them, retired teachers and certified teacher subs stand out as exceptionally credentialed — nearly 95% hold additional education credentials or certifications. Close to 30% are retired teachers who hold a master’s degree, highlighting their qualifications and background in education.

### Substitute Distribution by Gender

- Women
- Men
- Prefer Not To Answer



However, there is an emerging younger talent pipeline. Respondents 18-45 represent the remaining 40% of the sub pool and tell quite a different story. Among them, 38% are under the age of 30, bringing together a diverse mix of college students, young professionals, career builders, and gig economy workers. Over 80% have been subbing for less than 3 years, with half in their first year as a sub. While many in this group are newer to the role, a meaningful share are genuine pipeline candidates: emerging educators with interest in pursuing a permanent position in education.

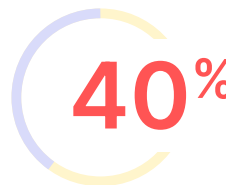
## DUAL PORTRAIT: COMMUNITY-ORIENTED SUBSTITUTES AND CAREER-PATH SEEKERS

Districts must implement strategies with tailored support and messaging to sustain reliable coverage from seasoned substitutes and accelerate the career builders through credentialing and development.

- Those in the 46+ age group (representing nearly 60% of the sub pool respondents) cite flexibility, supplemental income, control over their schedule and community connection as the most important job factors. 18.8% of those aged 46–61 and only 4.0% of those aged 62–80 express interest in pursuing permanent teaching positions.



**THE COMMUNITY ANCHOR**  
cite flexibility, supplemental income, schedule control, and community connection as most important job factors



**THE CAREER BUILDER**  
cite compensation, career advancement, flexibility, and making a difference as most important job factors

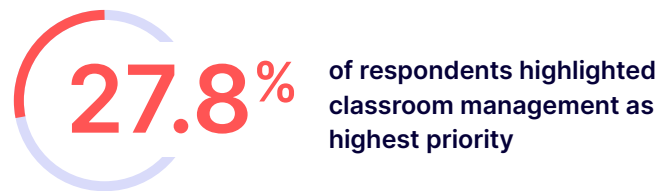
- In contrast, the remaining 40% (ages 18–45) are on a career path in education. This group values compensation, career advancement, flexibility, and making a difference. Credentials matter: about 35% want a permanent credential, 10.6% are pursuing certification, and 14.8% already hold one. For 2026–27, 62% plan to continue subbing, 25.5% aim to transition to another education role, and 6% plan to leave education.

## NEED FOR TRAINING AND SUPPORT

A significant finding is that 1 in 4 substitutes reported never receiving any training, highlighting a critical operational gap in professional development and overall support that can impact substitute effectiveness and student learning outcomes.

Respondents highlighted several training priorities. Classroom management leads the list at 27.8% overall, rising to 41.9% among 18–29-year-olds. Using technology in the classroom is a close second at 27.5% overall, with 36.3% of the 62–80 age group citing it as a need. Other key areas include supporting students with disabilities (20.6%), effective teaching strategies (18.8%), and trauma-informed teaching strategies (10.9%).

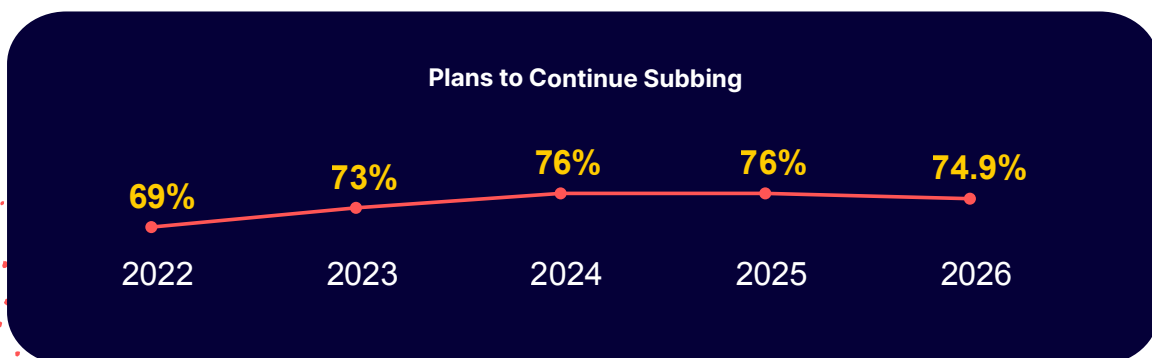
The age split on training needs is significant for district planning. Younger substitutes need more classroom management; older substitutes need more tech training. A one-size-fits-all approach will not work.



## RETENTION POTENTIAL

Stability within the substitute workforce is promising, with nearly 75% of respondents planning to continue in their roles next year.

- First-year subs are shrinking but their spark matters: first-year subs dropped from 41% (2022) to 28% (2026), while 1–3 years rose from 25% to 36%. This suggests districts can implement better strategies to both grow and sustain this pool.
- Experienced subs are invaluable yet fragile without new entrants: the pool is aging, with ages 46+ now comprising about 60% of subs; as first-years decline, higher-tenure cohorts grow, underscoring the need for a steady influx of new entrants.

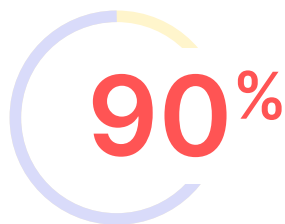


- Onboarding gaps drive churn: 28% are in their first year and report the strongest training gaps; district-level onboarding plus mentorship can curb first-term departures and stabilize the lifecycle.

K-12 districts have the opportunity to implement targeted retention strategies for their entire sub workforce. By providing continuous support through both mentorship and robust systems, acknowledging and rewarding their contributions, and developing career pathways, districts can create a pathway for a more engaged and dedicated substitute workforce poised for success.

## MISSION MOTIVATED AND REGIONAL DISPARITIES

90% of substitutes are motivated by the mission to positively influence student outcomes. “Making a difference” now outranks flexibility, career-building, healthcare benefits, and compensation as a motivating factor when considering a job, with compensation cited as the second most important factor (85%). However, significant regional discrepancies exist, highlighting the unique challenges and opportunities that different K-12 districts face across various areas.



**90%**  
of substitutes are motivated by the mission to make a positive difference

The Northwest region has the youngest substitute pool, with 49.8% aged 18–45, but the lowest retention rate at 68.2%. Meanwhile, substitutes in the Southwest prioritize compensation, with 87.8% indicating it as the most important factor, and 26.6% identifying as gig workers – substitutes who typically work on a flexible, short-term basis. The Midwest stands out with the most experienced workforce, where 23.1% have over six years in subbing, and a 76.8% plans-to-continue rate. These findings reaffirm that a one-size-fits-all approach for sustaining a strong substitute workforce is ineffective. Districts must address these regional-specific factors and adopt tailored strategies that consider the diverse needs and motivations of substitutes in each region.

## Conclusion

The survey results highlight a pressing need for K-12 districts to adopt adaptive strategies that address the distinct challenges and motivations of today’s substitute teacher workforce. By providing more professional development opportunities, offering flexibility in classroom placements, and recognizing regional variations, districts can cultivate a more stable and engaged substitute workforce. This empowerment not only allows these educators to deliver consistent, quality instruction during teacher absences but also fosters a sense of community engagement and recognition.

Prioritizing support and resources allow K-12 districts to create a cohesive educational environment where substitutes feel valued and connected to the school community, and students have no disruption in learning continuity. A strong substitute workforce builds trust in classrooms, enriching the educational experience for students and enabling districts to effectively respond to staffing needs.

# Methodology

Results of Red Rover's 2026 National Substitute Survey are based on responses from over 18,000 substitute teachers in K-12 districts across 46 states. Survey questions encompassed a range of demographic, career aspirations, training needs, and perceptions of current support and compensation. The findings offer actionable insights for HR leaders and administrators to strengthen their substitute workforce management strategy, resulting in a more sustainable and effective substitute teacher workforce.

## About the Substitute Management Advisory Council



Founded in 2023 in partnership with Red Rover, the Substitute Management Advisory Council is dedicated to advancing the substitute management profession to support K-12 student academics and growth. Council members are educational leaders, serving as voices and thought leaders for substitute managers nationwide, and who share a common mission of substitute teacher success, as their work directly impacts classroom continuity and student success across our nation's schools. To learn more visit: [smacouncil.com](https://smacouncil.com).

### ABOUT RED ROVER

Red Rover empowers every classroom with the best educators every day with a modern human capital management platform purpose built for K-12 districts to cultivate thriving school communities. Rooted in the mission to simplify the daily tasks of education professionals and guided by the belief that schools deserve better, Red Rover's K-12 human capital management platform offers intuitive tools that connect data with people-first experiences to drive success across schools and districts. The platform delivers a unified approach to HR and human capital management, connecting the employee lifecycle across Absence Management, Time Tracking, Hiring, Professional Development Management, and Records.