

Suggestions and Ideas to Address the Staffing Crisis and Substitute Teacher Shortages

In addressing the ongoing crisis of the COVID-19 pandemic and its effect on staffing, including a relentless sub shortage, the following strategies and tactics may be useful for local unions to consider.

Negotiations & Contract Enforcement

1. Read your contract language for protections or rules governing prep time and the duty day. Consider working with your Field Staff to file a grievance if you have the ability to decline subbing during prep time but are being assigned to sub in violation of the language or extend the length of the duty day to cover for colleagues.
2. Negotiate an MOU to address needs related to substitute coverage. Education Minnesota Bargaining Guidance can be found in the Bargaining Alerts section of the Education Minnesota website.
<https://educationminnesota.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/Substitute-coverage-and-options-BA.docx>

Sample language can be found here:

<https://educationminnesota.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/Substitute-coverage-sample-language-1.pdf>

A sample protocol from Rosemount-Apple Valley Eagan can be found here:

<https://educationminnesota.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/Sub-Coverage-Protocol-Suggestions-1.pdf>

3. If your contract already has language that allows the district to unilaterally assign members to sub during their prep, consider proposing language that removes this unilateral right or provides additional guardrails against over-reliance on asking colleagues to give up prep time to cover. If you can't remove the language, consider adding language to your contract that limits the amount of time the district can unilaterally reassign teachers during their prep time or adds meaningful compensation.
4. When contract language allows administrators to assign teachers to duties (sub) during their prep:
 - a. Ask for volunteers first!
 - b. Make sure people are paid meaningfully. Ask for your teacher hourly rate or higher. There is a benefit to having an experienced, licensed teacher as a substitute. Your professional expertise should be valued.
 - c. Come up with a rotation schedule so that the same people are not asked every time to sub. Make sure it includes ALL licensed individuals: superintendent, principals, assistant principals, coaches, teachers, TOSA's, etc. Having a rotation plan also helps support untenured teachers who are less likely to say no to requests or social pressure.
5. Negotiate a plan with the district so that when staff absences reach a certain level (%__of instructional staff absent), an entire grade or school goes to distance learning.
6. Adjust the school calendar to have more e-learning or non-instructional days **now**. This may help people schedule required absences for these dates and would also alleviate the need for subs on occasion, giving everyone a breather.

7. Make one day every week an asynchronous learning day. No subs would be required- this would reduce pressure on the sub system.
8. Negotiate extra planning time for teachers to prepare for absences. At this point, absences due to COVID-19 quarantines or illness are inevitable and it is better to plan for them than to continue to scramble.

Improve Working Conditions for Substitute Teachers:

9. Discuss with district leaders the need to raise substitute pay. In this market, substitute teachers are shopping around for the best pay. Make sure your district's pay is competitive. This is also a permissive subject of bargaining.
10. See if your district will offer subs an incentive to sub in your district! One district gives subs an extra day's pay for every 5 days they sub in their district. Work with the district to offer health insurance benefits to provide a reason for subs to commit to a certain district.
11. Discuss with HR the benefit of making substitute positions permanent positions with benefits. Create building substitute positions or positions shared between two buildings. These positions would also be eligible for continuing contract/tenure and bargaining unit membership, which may make them more stable to applicants. If there isn't a subbing opening that day, an increasingly rare circumstance, they can be assigned other instructional supports or duties. Or they could help a rotation of teachers in their classes or with prep work. **There is always work to be done.**
12. Consider granting extra time to teachers who sub. For every "x" hours of subbing you could earn an extra sick day or PTO day.
13. Work with districts to remove barriers for people trying to obtain substitute teaching credentials. Is there a cost for a background check they could absorb? Or a way to make the process easier for people?
14. Ensure that local leaders are equipped to communicate any plan for substitute coverage to members in addition to depending on the district for communication. This ensures that all members are notified, and that the process/procedure is clear for members and district administrators. Again this also supports new teachers who may be hesitant to say no thank you to subbing.

Organizing/Collective Action

15. Act collectively to send a message! Are your members ready to take action together? Can you draw attention to the lack of subs and the pressure it's putting on teachers by having a collective "Say No" day to subbing?
16. Communicate with each other! If your district has a policy to pay teachers who lose prep time due to subbing- CLAIM IT. Every time!
17. Share the number of unfilled absences each day with the community, tell your stories.
18. Keep track of the number of total hours of prep time lost in each building and share the message with the community or school board. Talk about the additional workload stress that is being forced on teachers during this substitute shortage and the cost to student well-being.

19. Organize speakers at school board meetings to bring data (how many positions go unfilled, what it feels like in the day of a teacher when you lose your prep, share your stories!)
20. Speak or write to legislators, MDE, Letters to the Editor to see if we can get some assistance in solving this.

Improve recruitment efforts for substitutes

21. Work with principals or school leaders to make calls to prospective subs, give them a small coffee gift card or other gift card and thank them face-to-face when they show up.
22. Write a letter to community members and backpack it home (or use a newsletter, social media feed or other line of communication to parents). For example: "Hello parents of students in the " _____ " Community. You may have heard we are short of substitute teachers. We've been told some community members are interested, but that they are only available on certain days, only at our building, and only for certain grade levels. We hear you and we can work with you! Please call the principal, and we will work out a combination that is a winner for all."
23. Send letters to recent retirees inviting them to reconsider subbing. Districts should consider offering to pay retired teachers at their last daily/hourly rate of pay to sub, or offer health insurance benefits.
24. Contact local colleges/education programs to see if recent graduates, or student cadre's finishing up their student teaching might be interested in subbing for experience.

Provide supports for substitute teachers in buildings

25. Provide a paid orientation day at the beginning of the year or each quarter/semester where subs can be trained in technology, district procedures, drills, and other district-wide basics so they feel prepared and supported.
26. Provide ongoing paid training days for substitutes and a way to access training if they identify skills they need to be successful. This could also be a good use of time on days when subs are not needed.
27. Standardize communication formats across your district:
 - a. Standardize the Substitute Binder: Office Support Staff (in collaboration with the building administrators) can create the "basics" for a sub binder. This could include: building maps, phone lists, COVID protocols, evacuation/drill procedures, how to access behavior support, and a standard feedback form. Standardizing this allows a sub to know what to expect and where to find the information easily.
 - b. Standardize the lesson plan/schedule template that teachers use when leaving plans for a substitute. Again, the more consistent we are helps the substitute teachers know what to expect and how to access the information.
28. Give substitutes a lanyard with contact information and building resources to have on hand.
29. Establish a process for proactively requesting additional supports when a teacher is absent and knows that the group of students will need extra behavior support on days when substitutes are in place.

30. Have a backup plan for substitute teachers. Create a shared drive folder that a sub can access easily with additional review materials, games, lessons in case what was left is not enough.
31. Be welcoming and inclusive!
 - a. Include Substitute Teachers in Teacher Appreciation events
 - b. Swag: can your building give a tshirt, coffee, other gear?
 - c. Ticket for a free lunch on days they sub
 - d. Rename Substitutes: "Guest Teachers"
32. Create a "Student Helper" or "Student Leader" in each class so that when a substitute has a responsible student to ask for help. This creates a climate where the expectations are clear that learning continues even if there is a guest teacher.