

October 2020

ONcall

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How do you treat your substitutes?

Many school districts will start the year remotely because of the COVID-19 pandemic, but that won't negate the need for substitutes. Teachers, secretaries, custodians and other staff still will get sick, have doctor or dentist appointments or other situations where they need some time off to tend to personal business.

The need for substitutes may be higher than ever in districts that are able to offer in-person instruction. Some teachers — especially those who are at higher risk of complications from COVID-19 because of age or underlying medical conditions — are weighing whether they will even go back to their jobs while the pandemic continues. That could result in the need for long-term substitutes.

Many districts already scramble to find substitute bus drivers, so that may be even more of a challenge while the pandemic continues, especially with many drivers in the “at risk” age group. The same is true of other support staff, such as food-service workers. Most districts are still providing school breakfast and lunch, even if schools are offering distance learning.

Quarantine requirements also create a greater need for substitutes. Most districts follow precautions requiring staff to self-quarantine after exposure to COVID-19 and stay home with any mild symptoms of illness. In the past, staff might come to school with a minor sore throat or cold, but that is discouraged now.

So, as the new year begins, recruiting and training substitutes should be a priority to ensure that you have people available when you need them. Typically, districts don't offer much training for substitutes, but in this time of change, training will be critical to help your substitutes be well-prepared to step in.

Things will be different for regular staff, and even more so for substitutes. Most will not have experience with distance learning. Most will not be familiar with the safety and cleaning protocols for COVID-19 because this is all new for everyone.

Here are some tips for preparing substitutes for their assignments:

Train, train, train.

All substitutes — whether teachers, educational assistants, clerical staff or bus drivers — need explicit training on working in a pandemic. Online tools, such as Zoom and Google Meet, make it easier and more convenient for substitutes to attend trainings, even the night before an assignment. Substitute teachers may need instruction in how to use some of the classroom instructional programs, as well as online testing procedures and protocols.

Put it in writing.

Be as clear as possible in writing out specific instructions, so that your substitutes understand

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and are comfortable with their role and what's expected of them. For substitute teachers, it will be important to provide not only the usual lesson plans, but also tips and guidance on how to teach effectively in a remote classroom.

Assign them to a specific school.

While there is often competition for popular, skilled substitutes, it is good practice during these times to assign substitutes to specific buildings. It not only helps the substitutes build stronger relationships with students and faculty, but it also helps reduce the number of people a substitute is exposed to over the course of a work week.

Know the COVID-19 Response Plan.

Every school should have a plan in place to protect staff, students and families from the spread of COVID-19, and also a response plan in place if a student, teacher, or staff member tests positive for the virus. Make sure all staff, including substitutes, have a copy of these plans — or know where to access them on the website.

Keep them safe.

Substitutes fill an important need in schools, and many districts have faced a shortage of qualified substitutes. Wages are generally not very high, and they don't receive sick leave or health benefits. That's the job, and they understand it, but they should feel as safe as possible when they work in schools. Share the safety protocols, and be sure they know that keeping them safe is a priority.

Show appreciation.

Even in normal times, the start of school is a stressful time as staff prepare for a new year. But in a pandemic, it involves so much more — learning new systems for distance learning, initiating new safety protocols including face masks and social distancing, communicating through online platforms. It's important to take time to thank substitutes and recognize the important contribution they are making because schools will not be able to operate efficiently — perhaps even at all — without them. Whether it's a quick email of thanks, a written note or a short video on the website noting their contribution, it's important to let them know they are valued and appreciated.

Contributed by Connie Potter, communications consultant