



**Data-Driven
Human Capital
Strategies**

STRATEGY BRIEF:

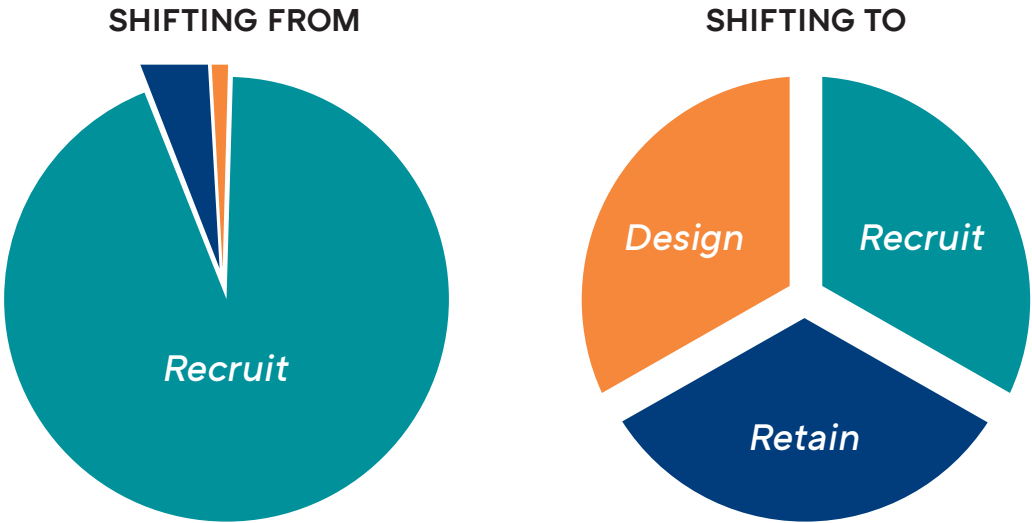
Building Strong Substitute Programs

Maximizing the Return on your Investment

Context

Developing and sustaining a pool of effective substitute teachers poses a challenge for schools across Pennsylvania—often demanding constant time, effort and resources. The quality of substitutes represents a high-leverage opportunity to positively impact student learning. The following provides an overview of effective practices to recruit, train and retain substitute teachers.

Ideally, a system will divide its focus equally on the processes of designing a substitute program, recruiting substitutes, and retaining them. In reality, LEAs tend to focus the vast majority of their efforts on recruiting substitute teachers.¹ This brief will address not only **why** to increase the focus on designing and retaining, but also options for **how** to do so.



For further details, you can view [a webinar developed by Substantial Classrooms and Pennsylvania’s System for LEA/School Improvement.](#)

¹ Viallet, J. & von Moos, A. (2021). Substantial classrooms: Redesigning the substitute teaching experience. Jossey-Bass: Hoboken, NJ.

Design the Role

When designing, or adjusting the design of, a substitute teacher role, leaders can consider the following components: compensation, work location, hours, duties, equity of access to quality substitutes across schools, and opportunities to connect with colleagues.

Increasing pay often emerges as a strategy for improving recruitment and retention. However, national trends suggest that any increase in pay should be substantial and competitive with the local labor market in order to produce the school's desired outcomes.² Instead, or in addition, schools can use smaller forms of compensation such as service recognition gifts, mentoring, and professional learning.

When designing the substitute position, consider that creating full-time building substitute positions can help improve recruitment, quality and retention. Some schools made the change to full-time substitutes out of necessity during the pandemic; keeping these roles in place can continue to benefit the schools. Substitutes who work in the same school each day tend to have better student and colleague relationships, which improves the experience for the substitutes, the other staff and, more importantly, the students themselves. School leaders and other staff do not need to spend time and energy orienting substitutes to the school, its processes, and its students throughout the year. Furthermore, when not needed to cover a class, these full-time substitutes can provide tutoring or small group support for students. Finally, full-time substitutes are more likely to stay in their positions from one year to the next.

School or LEA leaders considering implementing or improving a full-time substitute position can use this [slide deck](#) from Substantial Classrooms, which summarizes design considerations for such substitute roles. Key considerations include:

- **Whether to assign oversight and support** of full-time substitutes to school or LEA leaders
- **How to prioritize** which schools receive full-time substitutes first
- **The role of the substitute** on days when no classroom coverage is needed
- **How benefits for full-time substitutes** will differ from those of other substitutes

Generally, about half of substitutes are aspiring teachers.³ LEAs can develop supports for substitutes who aim to become teachers, while increasing the likelihood that these substitutes will eventually teach in the same LEA. For an example, see [this two-page description of a teacher pipeline](#) from a Rhode Island school district, which supports substitute teachers in the process of becoming classroom teachers.

² Vialet & von Moos (2021).

³ Ibid.

Recruit

In a national survey from [the EdWeek Research Center](#), almost half of districts reported that they do not use any strategies to recruit or retain substitutes. When changing or implementing strategies to find effective candidates, leaders can consider their approaches to marketing, the application process, and onboarding for new hires. [This recruitment self-assessment](#) addresses those components of substitute recruitment.

A strategic recruitment strategy can reduce the time and resources needed to find a sufficient pool of qualified and effective substitutes. In particular, be sure to provide an application specific to the substitute position, rather than asking substitute candidates to fill out the application usually used for classroom teachers. As with recruitment for all roles, keep in regular communication with candidates so they know where they stand in the process and what next steps to expect. Other components of successful recruitment include:

- **Competitive compensation**
- **Prominently posted online information** about working as a substitute and about job openings
- **An application that is easy** to access and complete
- **An efficient and straightforward onboarding process** for new hires

Consider the various audiences with whom you are communicating when you market a substitute position. These can include students finishing educator preparation, recent college graduates, career changers, and semi-retired educators, among others.

For example, college students in their final year of teacher preparation tend to seek jobs that are flexible, part-time, and meaningful to them. A substitute role can meet each of these criteria. School systems can adapt their recruitment and onboarding processes for higher education student—for example, by collaborating with educator preparation faculty and staff to consolidate candidates' paperwork and guide them through the process. Keep in mind that even though they are already studying to be teachers, these substitutes will still need clear instructions (focus on what to do as substitutes, rather than what not to do). If your LEA has a group of higher education students working as substitutes, provide opportunities for them to communicate and support one another, e.g., joint professional learning or a group text chain. These soon-to-be graduates may also be more likely to apply for full-time teaching jobs in a district where they have already worked as a substitute. For further details, see [this guide for advice on effectively employing higher education students as substitutes](#).

Try adding new strategies to market substitute positions to an expanded audience, beyond the traditional online job sites.

To reach out to your school community:

- **Send flyers** home with students
- **Communicate through local community organizations**, including those who work with retirees
- **Use existing communications** with parents or volunteers, such as newsletters or social media

To reach out to retired educators:

- **Regularly ask your retiring educators** if they would like to learn about future opportunities to substitute
- **Hire retirees as “mentor” substitutes** who also help support colleagues who are new to substituting, especially in higher need schools

To reach out to students in educator preparation programs:

- **Connect with faculty** of educator preparation programs
- **Attend campus job fairs**
- **Speak to classes or student groups** about substitute opportunities
- **Use your current employees** who are recent alumni of the program
- **Emphasize the importance for future teachers** of early experience in various school settings

To reach out to career-changers from other fields:

- **Invite candidates** to visit the school
- **Provide testimonials** from current substitutes about the experience and benefits of working in your school
- **Describe a “day in the life”** of a substitute at your school

Retain

While each substitute will have different priorities that impact the decision to stay in a substitute role, common factors include job satisfaction, sustainability, skills development, and connection with colleagues.


Substitutes often report feeling isolated in their roles.⁴ Focus on building connections between substitutes and other school staff, and among substitutes within a school or LEA. To increase a sense of belonging in the school, and to provide more support for the school, invites substitutes to participate in extracurricular activities, school events, and ongoing professional learning for teachers.

Components already mentioned in this brief, such as compensation and opportunities for growth, are also key factors in retention. Thus, when designing all aspects of the substitute teacher role, consider what will help to retain substitutes and gather input from your substitutes about their views of their roles and working conditions.

Professional Learning

Quality professional learning can both increase the effectiveness of substitutes and help retain them in their jobs. One-time training is often a poor investment compared to ongoing professional learning that helps substitutes to build their practice. While inviting substitutes to join professional learning with other teachers can be valuable, be sure to provide learning and resources that are specific to the context of substitute teachers. In the same [EdWeek Research Center](#) survey, 44 percent of LEAs indicated that they do not offer training or professional learning to substitutes. The types of training that leaders thought would be most effective at improving substitute teaching include classroom management, effective teaching strategies, and ongoing professional development in general.

⁴ Vialet & von Moos (2021).



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DEVELOPED IN PARTNERSHIP WITH:
Pennsylvania's System for LEA/School Improvement
and
Substantial Classrooms ([substantialclassrooms.org](https://www.substantialclassrooms.org))

For the full Human Capital Strategies resource series,
visit <https://www.iu13.org/school-improvement>