



The Consequences of Support Staff Subbing in Schools

By Educator Barnes – November 20, 2021

Not only is there a teacher shortage, but there is also a substitute teacher shortage. Last year, when I was a school administrator, I was troubled when I saw a text coming in from a teacher

late at night or right before the school day started because many times it was because the teacher was not coming to work.

I understand life happens and teachers may have to call out with short notice. Since we are in a pandemic, COVID-19 caused increased teacher absences. The teacher could have tested positive or be a caregiver for someone who did and need to stay home. These absences are in addition to all the other reasons a teacher may call in sick. Most time, sub requests were not filled. I had to sub or a support staff member had to sub. Unless there was an emergency that required an administrator, I could handle subbing. Honestly, any time I can teach, I love it. Unfortunately, that meant having to do tasks I would typically complete in my office at home. At least there was a solution for me completing tasks I needed to complete even if it wasn't an enjoyable one for me.

Unfortunately, when support staff is being used to sub, there isn't a way to make up or cover their absences and the responsibilities they were actually supposed to be doing. When I say support staff, I mean teacher-coaches, English as new language teachers, special education teachers, Title I teachers, interventionists, and classroom assistants. All of these roles are needed, but the adults in these roles are being pulled in many directions and not being able to serve students the way they need.

I know you might be thinking, "How do teacher-coaches serve students? Don't they work with adults?" The truth is some teachers need extra support in their instruction and classroom management. When they do not receive support, students suffer.

How do individual education plans (IEPs) for special education students and individual learning plans (ILPs) get implemented properly when special education teachers and English language learner teachers are subbing? The truth is they don't. Those students who are legally supposed to be supported are not receiving support. Instead of those students learning properly they are in a situation where they are being babysat instead of taught.

What is the solution?

The first point of action is to get to the bottom of why teachers are calling out and start individually addressing it. When I was an administrator, I was told before I started my job that rules had been put into place to prevent teachers from taking off. Guess what ... people still took off.

Early into my role, I asked, “Do we know why these people are frequently absent? Have we talked to them?” The response was silence. I only supervised a part of the school. Collectively with my team, I made my expectations known, and then I would individually follow up with people to share patterns I noticed. I even did this when I was a teacher coach to help a principal deal with the same issue.

“Ms. _____, I have noticed that you seem to be absent every other Friday. I also noticed that you either call in Friday morning or the Thursday before. Let’s talk about the impact of your absence, and I would also like to know if there is any context, I need to know to better support you.” People do what they want to do when they know you will not address them individually. What happened? Most people magically stopped being absent. The Friday flu and Monday malady were cured. A few found another job. The other few had real issues going on and we planned for their absences in advance and got them the support they needed.

Schools need teachers to be present so other staff members do not have to cover their roles. When the support staff can’t support students that impacts the teachers who do show up. If you are a school administrator, pull up to those chronically absent teachers’ classrooms and have a direct conversation with your data about their attendance in hand. Your students deserve better and need you to address the situation.

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