



Desperately Seeking Substitutes

It's a childhood memory many Americans share: that feeling of walking into class to discover there's a substitute teacher. There's a little shock, followed by a lift of reprieve. Maybe the quiz is canceled. Maybe you'll get away with not having finished your homework. Or maybe you'll get to watch a movie. But, as an adult, have you ever considered becoming a substitute teacher?

Substitute teachers are the unsung heroes of their schools and communities, and they're in desperately short supply. Every day, nearly 50 million students in the U.S. go to school in a badly stressed education system with an ongoing teacher shortage. According to the Learning Policy Institute, there are almost 42,000 unfilled teacher positions across the country, and that number is likely underestimated.

Teachers are valiant, overworked, and underpaid. Also, they're human beings who, at times, will need a day of leave to recover from the flu, nurse a sick child, or tend to an emergency. But sometimes, there just aren't subs to replace them.

If you're someone who enjoys being around children, has extra time, and wants to continue giving back to your community, substitute teaching could be a great fit for you. Here are some reasons professionals and retirees from many fields might consider joining a local substitute teacher pool.

A Crisis of Unfilled Teacher Absences

Sadly, the noble instructors of our nation's youth often have difficulty taking the sick days or personal leave they're entitled to because of the shortage of subs. While this has been a longstanding problem, the pandemic worsened shortages to the point that 20 percent of requests for teacher



coverage went unfilled, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS).

The problem is even more severe in economically disadvantaged districts and neighborhoods. In the Chicago Public Schools system, for example, the fill rate for absences in bottom-quintile schools averaged only 50 percent, compared to more than 95 percent at top schools, according to a 2023 BLS report.

“There are not enough subs, period,” says Elaine Thesus, a retired teacher in Greenville, North Carolina, who frequently substitutes. “Last Friday, I got a notice that there were 47 unfilled teacher absences in my school district.”

In some districts, teachers who require a day of leave must request it at least one month in advance due to the lack of available substitutes. Realistically, teachers can’t always know in advance when they need to miss work.

This means schools resort to drastic measures. They move students to a gym, cafeteria, or library, sometimes with little or no supervision. Classrooms may double up, leaving another teacher overwhelmed. “A resource teacher, librarian, or paraprofessional might get pulled in, just so there’s an adult in the room,” which means important student services won’t be delivered, says Minnie Ford, a retired educator and current substitute.

Or students get absorbed, meaning they’re distributed between several other classrooms and given independent work. “It’s a day of instruction lost, and it’s overloading the other classrooms,” says Thesus.

To make up for the shortfalls, school districts have tried raising pay, providing free training, and relaxing the requirements for joining the substitute pool. Most school districts have pathways for nonteachers to become substitutes, though the specifics vary.

Many former teachers, like Ford and Thesus, return to the classroom as substitutes after retirement, because they understand the dire need—and because it’s a pretty good gig. Trained, experienced educators are ideal substitutes, but anyone can be great at the job.

But I’ve Never Taught Before

If you’re an older adult or retiree from a nonteaching background, you can step up to help fill the gap. It doesn’t matter whether you’re familiar with the material. You can give a lot to students simply by drawing on your life experiences as a parent, coach, or professional.

“That’s what we need: more people who will take a day of leave from their job and sub once every month or two,” says James Monroe. “Then the school system could have a bigger bank of substitute teachers.” Monroe retired from a 15-year Air Force career before he moved into education. He worked as a substitute teacher in the 1990s before becoming a full-time high school teacher.



“You’ve got a wealth of knowledge you might not even realize,” he says. “You’d be surprised at the number of kids you might influence. Students really like having new people in their classrooms.” Male substitute teachers are especially needed, as kids tend to see fewer men working in schools.

Sometimes, the most valuable thing is a listening ear. If a student is struggling with an assignment, offer to help them read the directions. Ask them what they think they should do next. “A lot of kids don’t get that kind of attention from adults,” says Monroe.

Students benefit from exposure to diverse role models and hearing about different kinds of jobs. “If you’re subbing in high school, you can share how you got into your field,” says Ford. “You can help students fill out applications or make resumes.”

FIRST STEPS

One way to get started is to pick up the phone and call the principal at a local school. Ask about joining the sub pool. They’ll likely be delighted to have you. “Most school systems offer training for substitutes, a couple of hours or whatever, and you don’t have to pay anything,” says Mason. “They’re trying to entice people to come do this.”

A number of national educational staffing services also work with candidates to help them meet qualifications for substitute teaching. A few examples are Edustaff (edustaff.org), ESS (ess.com), and School Professionals (tempositions.com/school-professionals/). Working with children typically requires background checks and minimum education requirements, although each state or school district has its own credentialing requirements.

Grandparent Mentality

Thesus says being a substitute is easier and more fun than being a teacher, much like the trope that being a grandparent is better than being a parent. After retirement, she changed her attitude from “I’m their teacher” to “I’m their sub.”

“I get to enjoy all the positive things about teaching without the headaches,” she says. “I don’t have to deal with parents, discipline, grading, paperwork, lesson planning, or meetings. At 3:30, I’m going to leave this class behind.”

This mentality makes her more relaxed about things like how students act in the classroom. While she doesn’t allow fighting or extreme unruliness, “if they’re talking quietly in class, I don’t care,” says Thesus. “Behavior you can’t get away with at home, grandma doesn’t care!”

Working in a room full of kids from Gen Z or Generation Alpha can be an opportunity for older adults to keep current. People who haven’t spent much time around youth culture may find it invigorating,



because many students today have a unique vibe. “A lot of kids today are treated almost like their parents are their friends,” says Monroe. “There are pluses and minuses to that, but they are then more comfortable and more open to speaking to adults, which is a good thing.”

Thesus has encouraged retired friends who have time on their hands to investigate substitute teaching. She touts the extremely flexible schedule, lack of late hours, and, in most cases, summers off. “You can choose when you want to work or not to work,” she says.

Becoming a substitute teacher can be a truly adventurous—but also simple—way to give back. Substitutes make a positive impact on the students in their classes, the schools where they work, and the broader community. After all, you never know whether something you bring to the classroom might become an important memory for one of the world’s future leaders.

By Jeanne Lee

Jeanne Lee is a freelance writer living in a lovely college town in Ohio. She has written about consumer and business topics for 20 years, including stints at *Fortune* and *Money*. her works has appeared in publications like *USA TODAY*, *Fortune Small Business*, and *Health*. She loves thinking about ways for people to hack their finances, and she daydreams about paying off her mortgage before she has to pay for college for her two boys.

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