

A Substitute is No Substitute:

A Framework for More Intentional Substitute Teacher

Placements, Curriculum and Teaching

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DISCLAIMER

This study has been prepared for the Substantial, Oakland, California.

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Executive Summary

Substitute teachers represent a problem that is neither too big to address, nor too small to matter. This report looks at how the assumptions, priorities and practices in one urban school district place substitute teachers and how students are affected by these methods. Equity needs to be at the core of any serious examination of public schools. This requires centering on the needs of students who cannot afford and do not tolerate people wasting their time. In the District, responsibility for placing substitute teachers is shared through a combination of formal and informal systems that have the potential to accommodate differences among students, schools and substitute teachers.

There are two compelling reasons not to accept teacher absences as acceptably lost time. The first is that today's public school students continue to represent a growing population at the far end of a dangerously imbalanced socioeconomic ladder. Every day that students spend at school either helps or harms them. Students, schools and communities should not be asked to accept this loss. The second reason is the huge potential of these lost hours to be laboratories for change. The risk of making things worse is so slim, and the possibility of improving practice too great. The loss is not only to students of absent teachers. Teachers and administrators who have entered the profession to improve the lives of students deserve the space to experiment, make mistakes and grow their practice.

Assumptions that cement patterns of low expectation into practices and policies need to be replaced with realities – or at least with an openness to observe and discover current truths. Those truths demand a change in priorities and, in turn changes in practices and policies that improve schools and classrooms, both with and without substitute teacher.

