EDITORIAL

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Tennessee Needs a Statewide Plan for Substitute Teachers

SUMMARY

"We should begin by recognizing the responsibilities substitutes carry. When coverage fails, the burden spreads. A teacher takes on more students. A colleague loses time needed to prepare lessons or contact parents. Students face another disruption. It is a cycle we see repeated again and again. What looks manageable on a staffing spreadsheet can feel very different in a classroom."

Before the first bell rings across Tennessee on a school day, a principal is already trying to solve a problem: several teachers are absent, and there are not enough substitutes. Classes may be split. Teachers may be asked to give up their planning periods. Administrators may set aside other responsibilities to cover classrooms. The doors open, but the school day begins under strain.

Tennessee needs a statewide substitute teacher plan. Reliable classroom coverage is essential to delivering public education. It deserves the same serious attention as teacher recruitment and retention.

Tennessee's 2024–25 educator vacancy report offers encouraging news. Districts reported 817 vacancies in the spring, and the statewide vacancy rate fell to 1.06 percent, down from 1.99 percent the previous year. That progress matters. But permanent vacancies and daily substitute coverage address different problems. A school can fill every teaching position and still struggle when employees are absent.

Recently, we learned that one middle Tennessee school had nine to twelve employees absent, and teacher candidates were reassigned to cover those classrooms. These accounts are not a statewide count. However, they are a reason to ask better questions and collect the information Tennessee needs.

When coverage fails, the burden spreads. A teacher takes on more students. A colleague loses time needed to prepare lessons or contact parents. Students face another disruption. It is a cycle we see repeated again and again.

What looks manageable on a staffing spreadsheet can feel very different in a classroom. We should begin by recognizing the responsibilities substitutes carry. They enter unfamiliar rooms, learn procedures quickly, manage behavior, and keep instruction moving. Sometimes they have excellent lesson plans and strong support. Other times, they walk into uncertainty.

Compensation should reflect that responsibility. Rutherford County Schools, one of the better systems in our state, posted daily rates of $100 to $125, depending on credentials and assignment location, plus additional pay on Mondays and Fridays. That is a local example, not the statewide average. It illustrates why Tennessee needs a clearer picture of compensation and recruitment conditions.

A practical statewide plan should begin with standardized reporting. How many absences require substitutes? How many assignments are filled? When assignments remain unfilled, who covers them? How often do teachers lose planning time or students end up in combined classes?

Use existing systems wherever possible. Educators do not need another paperwork burden. Policymakers need reliable information before declaring the problem solved.

Next, Tennessee should help districts build reliable substitute pools. State support could help districts improve daily rates, offer incentives for difficult assignments, and establish permanent building substitutes or shared coverage teams. Rural districts should have opportunities to collaborate across district lines where geography allows.

Local leaders should retain flexibility. A statewide strategy should provide resources, set clear expectations, and offer ways to measure results.

Preparation matters, too. Substitutes need practical training in classroom management, emergency procedures, student confidentiality, and supporting students with disabilities. They also need usable lesson plans, clear directions, and an administrator who responds promptly when help is needed.

A welcoming front office and a prepared classroom cost little. They can make a meaningful difference in whether someone accepts another assignment.

We must also protect teacher preparation. Grow Your Own apprentices and student teachers need supervised practice, feedback, and time to develop their skills. Appropriate teaching responsibilities should be part of that experience. Routine reassignment to cover unrelated absences can undermine it.

Preparation providers and districts should set clear boundaries. Tennessee cannot strengthen tomorrow's teacher workforce by repeatedly interrupting training to address today's shortages.

Finally, absence data should inform support, not be weaponized against educators. Teachers get sick, care for family members, and need professional development. Schools must plan for legitimate leave. Districts should also examine whether workload, unsafe conditions, or inadequate behavioral support are creating avoidable pressure.

The Tennessee Department of Education should convene educators, substitutes, district leaders, preparation programs, and lawmakers to develop a funded plan with measurable goals. Retired educators and other qualified community members should help shape recruitment efforts.

Policymakers must ensure educators have the support they need to do their jobs well. That includes the people who step into a classroom when the regular teacher is absent. A substitute teacher is part of a school's instructional team.

Tennessee should recruit, prepare, support, and fairly compensate substitutes. Every school needs a dependable answer to a predictable question: Who will teach these children today?

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