

Teachers Solve Chronic Problems

Alex Kajitani rallied teachers in his school to solve a persistent challenge: never having enough substitute teachers at school (and forcing teachers to cover classes during planning).

State: California

Source: [National Network of State Teachers of the Year](#)

A few years ago, I was teaching in a school suffering from a serious shortage of substitute teachers. Many would not come onto our campus, located in a dangerous neighborhood, opting instead to work in the more affluent schools across town. Without consulting the teachers, our administration came up with the plan to assign us to cover absent colleagues' classes on our respective prep periods each day. At first we accepted this new policy, and covered whenever asked, but it quickly began to have detrimental effects. Teachers became exhausted with no break, and we had to stay longer after school to prep. In addition, regularly scheduled meetings became disorganized, as many teachers were covering a class instead of attending. Morale plummeted and teachers and students were paying the price.

At an after-school staff meeting one day, we teachers talked at great length and realized we needed to exert our leadership to make things better. We *needed* to get subs to our school, pronto. After an honest discussion, we pinpointed the real reasons this was such a challenge: low substitute pay and a tense atmosphere at our school. Then we came up with a plan that addressed both issues and capitalized on one of our school's strengths: a great cafeteria staff. We called it the "free lunch for subs" program and it entailed teachers communicating with partner teachers and the cafeteria staff when they would be absent, then fellow teachers getting a specially prepared lunch to the substitute, as well as making a concerted effort to include them in lunchroom conversations and checking in with them at the end of their day. Within weeks, word quickly spread about the great experiences of subs at our school. Our sub shortage became a thing of the past, and we teachers got our prep periods back – by accomplishing this together, we also became a closer staff in the process.

The principles that worked in this situation can apply to all levels of teacher leadership: first, involve those who have a stake in an issue in coming up with a solution, and, second, agree on common goals. These goals must be specific and measurable, and *must* be determined and agreed upon by those with something at stake, rather than imposed from a disconnected "above." When teachers are involved in the process, they will hold *themselves* accountable — the truest mark of teacher leadership.

Tags/categories: policy leadership, school management, collaboration, NNSTOY