

Kirsten Stewart:

Once a school teacher, Megan Olson put her career on hold to stay at home with her young children. But in this pandemic year, she couldn't resist the tug and pull of the classroom, especially knowing her skills are in such high demand. So she sent a text to Corrie Barrett, the principal of her child's school and said, "Whenever you need me, I'm here."

Megan Olson:

I decided that in the middle of the summer that that was the way I could support, not knowing what would happen and what flu season would bring or even allergy season, right?

Kirsten Stewart:

Created by a vote of the people, Canyons District has always enjoyed uncommon levels of community support. And this year, when parents, grandparents, and patrons ask what they can do to help their neighborhood school, the answer, invariably, is sign up to substitute-teach. Brookwood Elementary Principal Corrie Barrett is lucky to have an abundance of do-gooders like Megan Olson to cover classrooms in a pinch.

Corrie Barrett:

Megan taught kindergarten for us here. She also taught at Quail Hollow for a time. And we are so appreciative of her for coming in. And we're fortunate here at Brookwood to have a pool of a few substitute teachers. We have two that are in our building today, as a matter of fact, who have taught at Brookwood and since gone on to raise families, but they have heeded our call and are with us.

Kirsten Stewart:

But this year as an abundance of caution means more teachers are needing to stay home for more reasons than usual, Canyons remains on the hunt for helping hands. This is Connect Canyons, the podcast about what we teach in Canyons District, how we teach, and why. I'm your host Kirsten Stewart, and today we are talking about substitute teachers, why we need them, who's stepping in, and how you can help.

Kirsten Stewart:

Every year, in schools throughout Utah, teachers use substitutes to fill in when they need to be away from the classroom. In a normal year, teachers use substitutes to help when they receive additional training or for medical reasons like surgery or maternity leave. But this year is different. Teachers need substitutes more than ever. Not only are teachers asked to quarantine if they have been in close proximity to someone who has tested positive with COVID-19, teachers are also encouraged to stay home when they have any illness out of an abundance of caution for their students and co-workers. That means if they have a headache, they stay home; if they have a sore throat, they stay home.

Sally Sansom:

Traditionally, teachers are those heroes, right, that work through anything. You know, it's, "I'm going to go to school because it's easier to go to school than make those sub plans." But our teachers are committed to keeping their students healthy, to keeping their co-workers healthy. And so they really are utilizing leave for illness. And, and that is something that, you know, we are happy to support with providing substitutes because we really do want teachers taking the time off that they need.

Kirsten Stewart:

That's Sally Sansom, an administrator in Canyons District's Human Resources Department. Her team has been working overtime to recruit subs, and they've been overwhelmed by the response.

Sally Sansom:

We've really seen a lot of community members come forward to support their schools. I love data, and when we look at the amount of substitute applications that we have processed, we have processed more applications in mid-October than we have all of last year. Our emergency sub applications have almost tripled. We also have a large pool. We have over 380 subs who are active right now, which means they've completed, you know, all of the process to be hired on as a sub.

Kirsten Stewart:

The problem, Sally says, isn't about supply so much as it's about demand.

Sally Sansom:

Demand has really increased. And some of the things we've done to help that is we have suspended professional development. We really are only filling absences right now of, you know, teachers who are ill or using their leave, or the COVID-related leave. So we are really trying to keep any other use of subs low. But even with that, we are maxing out every day. I mean, we are having over a hundred requests per day for substitutes.

Sally Sansom:

And we typically in most years have about a 97% fill rate. And right now we're averaging in the 80s. And so it is a challenge. And you can imagine what that does to a school when all of a sudden there are no district subs available. That's when they really turn to those emergency subs and those community members or other employees in the school that are really taking on additional loads to help support those classrooms.

Kirsten Stewart:

Canyons has a pool of regular and licensed substitutes. These are individuals who complete a training course and receive a substitute diploma before stepping into the classroom. Or they are members of the community who have a teaching license, or are retired teachers. Licensed substitutes can receive \$129 for a full day of work while regular substitutes can receive \$108 per day. This year with demands for substitutes that exceed the substitute pool, Sally is reaching out for the help of emergency substitutes to help land a hand. Emergency substitutes are paid \$90 for a full day of work.

Sally Sansom:

We aren't seeing them all choose to work every day and that's another challenge, you know, just with the nature of what we're all going through, with a lot of uncertainty, a lot of illness, even our subs get ill. So they aren't able to cover-

Kirsten Stewart:

If emergency, regular, and licensed substitutes can't be found, schools work hard to ensure that caring, capable adults are in a classroom. Even if school employees need to pick up a little extra load.

Sally Sansom:

Every classroom is going to be filled with a teacher or an assistant or another teacher that is working on their prep period. So we are going to make sure that the students have instruction and have a teacher for that day. It has just caused us to be very creative. We have to be creative in respecting the sizes of classes, respecting teachers' times. We actually have a database of district office employees who are willing to sub at a moment's notice, to go into our schools and fill some of those empty spots.

Kirsten Stewart:

For principals like Corrie, who know how hard it is to find a substitute for a class at the last minute, the community response to pitch in and help has made a huge difference in making in-person school possible this year. Answering the call to be an emergency substitute is one way parents can let teachers know they are appreciated.

Corrie Barrett:

Our School Community Council and our PTA, they are wanting, they are eager to get in and help us in any way they can. They're looking for innovative ways to have their presence known here and to let teachers know that they are appreciated. And really in this time, it is so important for our teachers to feel appreciated and feel like they are doing the very best that they can do. And there's no one better to give them that feeling than parents.

Kirsten Stewart:

And if you're worried about what it takes to be a substitute, Corrie has a helpful hint. "It's not as scary as it seems," she says.

Corrie Barrett:

And as a substitute teacher, you really have to have a few solid skills. Those solid skills are don't show weakness, walk into that classroom like you own that classroom and speak to the students in a firm, but kind voice. Anyone that has their own children and has learned to speak kindly, but also get your point across, I think can be a great substitute teacher. You just have to be willing to get in and try.

Kirsten Stewart:

So, other than being a superhero and swooping in to help your local school in times of need, why would anyone want to be a substitute? Sally Sansom makes a pretty good case. It's flexible work. It will give you an opportunity to use your talents, and it will make a big difference.

Sally Sansom:

You know, there are so many reasons why I would think you would want to be a sub; one, is flexibility. In this day and age, I think that's the biggest thing we've learned through the whole pandemic is the need for flexibility. And being a sub enables you to have that flexibility. The flexibility in your work hours, in your work time. If you prefer to go to work early, you might choose a high school. If you prefer to sleep in a little and go to work a little later, you might choose an elementary school. Flexibility in the type of job: maybe one day, you want to be a scientist and be a science teacher, the next day, you're going to be a PE teacher. You can really choose. And then the flexibility of the levels: you could be elementary one day, teaching kindergarten, and then, you know, teaching graduating seniors the next.

Sally Sansom:

So a lot of our subs like that flexibility, but there's also, if you have a special talent or a skill that you like to share, many of our subs have a lot to give. And so they choose jobs which allow them to give of their talents, give of their expertise, give back for the flexibility that we offer. And I think for the job that you're asked to do, the pay is competitive. And then, you know, just knowing that you are making a difference, I think what person doesn't like to go into a job and realize, you know, what, if I wasn't there today, there would be a big void, right? My taking on this job filled a huge hole that was there in that school, and I really made a difference. And I think for those of us now, if there's ways that we can help our schools, our communities, um, and we're looking for ways to do that. So, I mean, that's a great, great thing to do.

Kirsten Stewart:

Megan Olson knows as well as anyone that being a substitute teacher has its rewards beyond a day's wage. She recommends working as a substitute if you want to get the feeling that comes from making children smile.

Megan Olson:

Oh, these kids. You go in and a lot of them don't know who you are. Some of them have been my previous kids, but a lot of them, they don't know who you are and they end the day loving you. So they want you to come back. And I think that that's so fun to see, and it's definitely been rewarding just for that reason, yeah, whether it's just putting a smile on a kid's face, even though you can't see it (laughs), putting a smile on their face or just teaching a kid a new word. Put your foot in and ask what you can do. You don't have to be a teacher to be a sub, Just come and make a difference through subbing. You can't volunteer, and I know a lot of people in the community like to do that, so why not get paid and sub?

Kirsten Stewart:

School this year is a community effort. Thank you to the hundreds of substitutes who are helping us keep school open. And as always, thank you to Canyons' teachers and administrators for going above and beyond to provide students with a quality education. That's it for us this week, thanks for listening. This episode of Connect Canyons was reported by Kirsten Stewart and edited and produced by Amy Nielsen and Stephanie Christensen. Tune in next week, and be sure to encourage your friends to subscribe.