

Creating a Substitute Bank for Child Care Centers

Step by step

by Julie Payne

For years early childhood professionals working in child care facilities have faced a significant dilemma. When they are sick, need personal time off, or want to attend an educational opportunity during work time, there may not be anyone available to substitute for them.

All too often, they come to work sick, forego time off, and neglect professional development. If an absence is unavoidable and a substitute is unavailable, child care facility directors begin a shuffling game with

the remaining teachers and children.

While child care professionals agree that moving young children and teachers around creates a chaotic and disruptive environment that diminishes the quality of care, there is often no other option.

The solution to this problem seemed simple to a group of education and child care professionals in central Illinois: create a pool of qualified substitutes for child care centers similar to the pool of substitutes created by school districts for schools. This team of professionals, The Early Childhood Care and Education Partnership (ECCEP), decided to explore the issue and try to solve the problem.

ECCEP was initially formed in 1999 to enhance, expand, and collaborate on early childhood teacher recruitment, preparation, and on-going professional development and was originally funded by a Higher Education Cooperative Act (HECA) Grant. Although it was not their original mission to address the lack of substitutes in child care, they found it an impossible problem to ignore if they wanted to accomplish their goals. They also found that the solution was not so simple after all.

This is the story of how they created a functioning substitute bank in McLean County, Illinois.

1 – Exploring options

The ECCEP group decided to explore how this problem had been addressed in other communities and see if a model existed which could be duplicated in McLean County. The group was surprised to find that a coordinated substitute program did not exist anywhere in Illinois. Although several communities, including McLean County, had made several attempts to create a program, none had worked very successfully. A few substitute banks were discovered in other states including Olympia, Washington, which served as a guide for the ECCEP group.

ECCEP had envisioned a coordinated system where child care centers, pre-schools, and in-home child care providers could make one phone call to a substitute coordinator and request a substitute for a pre-planned staff absence or an emergency need and have a qualified, trained, willing, and dependable substitute arrive when needed, ready to work. But who would administer such a program? None of the local child care centers nor the Child Care Resource and Referral Network wanted to take on this additional responsibility.

A new resource in the community, The Nanny Agency, Inc., surfaced as a potential administrator. The agency already provides *substitutes* or backup child care to families in a similar manner to what ECCEP envisioned for centers. Families call the agency for child care as needed and qualified child care professionals are dispatched to the families' homes. ECCEP felt that The Nanny Agency might be able to do for centers what it was currently providing to families.

The possibility of partnering with The Nanny Agency seemed very workable, until discussions with a local Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) licensing professional presented more obstacles. DCFS codes require

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background checks for substitutes to be done by each center and has no guidelines for a substitute bank as envisioned by ECCEP. However, the local DCFS officials encouraged the group to put together a proposal for the top DCFS decision makers in Chicago and Springfield.

2 – Researching the need

The group realized that if it was going to approach DCFS to adapt or broaden its regulations, the case for the substitute bank needed to be clearly outlined. Illinois State University, one of the ECCEP partners, developed a substitute needs survey which was sent to all McLean County child care program directors.

Of the 30 programs that responded, directors estimated that they spent two hours per week on average looking for substitutes. The amount of time ranged from 30 minutes per week to ten hours per week. Over a 4-month period the directors reported needing an average of eight substitutes per month. On extreme ends of the scale, several centers reported their substitutes need to be as high as 28-50 times per month to cover extended staff absences for maternity leave, illness, or family crises, while others reported less than one time per month. Twenty five percent of the time, those that needed substitutes were unable to find a substitute. Forty-three percent reported that their inability to find substitutes was a significant issue for their center.

3 – Creating a vision

The group had already formed an initial vision for the substitute bank; but with the needs more clearly outlined, the group refined the vision to address how the bank would fulfill these needs. The bank would operate similar to a temporary employment agency performing

the following responsibilities:

- Recruit and accept applications for substitutes.
- Interview, assess qualifications, check references, perform background checks to include background assessments if applicable according to DCFS requirements.
- Arrange for training of substitutes through various participating child care centers, and/or educational institutions.
- Maintain current records for each substitute including their personal, health, administrative and professional qualifications, as well as the hours worked at each center.
- Provide a document and ID for each substitute certifying that the substitute has passed the background check and is listed with the Substitute Bank.
- Receive requests, match qualified substitutes to requests and assign substitutes to work as needed.

Participating day care centers, preschools, and in-home providers pay substitutes a standard rate and assume all employment responsibilities according to state and federal guidelines. The substitute bank does not serve as the employer. The substitute bank charges centers, preschools, and in-home providers a subscriber fee based on their capacity to cover administrative costs and a per time use fee based on their requests.

4 – Tapping the power of government

State DCFS officials did not initially embrace the proposal. Overwhelmed by their already full agendas, they did not see this project as a priority. The only way to make it a priority was to apply some pressure through state legislators by asking for their assistance in getting DCFS to consider the proposal. This is where the importance of collaboration

was truly experienced. It is doubtful that a single voice would have gotten the attention of the legislators in quite the same way as the ECCEP group received. Because its membership included representatives from the local university, community college, school districts, the local health department, and several child care related agencies and businesses, the legislators noted the large number and wide range of constituents interested in this issue. A local state representative took the lead and arranged a meeting with the director of DCFS.

Within a few weeks, the DCFS director called ECCEP representatives and said DCFS was willing to help in any way to make the substitute bank a reality in McLean County. Given the potential to solve a major problem for child care facilities, DCFS gave ECCEP permission to develop the substitute bank through The Nanny Agency, Inc. as a demonstration project in McLean County and was willing to work closely with the group in hopes that this might be a model for the development of other substitute banks in the state.

5 – Making the substitute bank operational

Recruiting for this type of program presents some unique challenges. The most likely candidates to be substitutes are people who are not interested in more permanent work because they need to keep their schedules flexible and do not want to commit to on-going work. A candidate might be a mom with school-age children who wants to be available on days when school is out, or someone with another commitment such as school or volunteer work that may require more involvement at different times in the year. Since these people may not be reading help-wanted ads, The Nanny Agency used radio spots and its sizeable base of sitters and nannies to recruit substitutes.

The selection process includes completing an application, providing an official transcript, participating in an interview, signing an agreement which allows The Nanny Agency, Inc. to receive their background information, providing three child care references, providing two forms of official identification, and getting a TB test and physical.

Once an applicant has successfully completed the selection process, they receive a portable file, which is taken to any child care center job assignment. The portable file includes a copy of their application, transcripts, health forms, identification, W-4 form, and several other forms required by DCFS, such as the acknowledgement of mandated reporter status. By providing all this information in a portable file, the center can make a copy of the information they need and the substitute does not need to complete the same paperwork at each center.

The local Child Care Resource and Referral Center (CCRRN) and the McLean County Association of Young Children (MCAEYC) are providing training for the child care workers including substitutes.

6 – Launching the demonstration project

In January 2003, The Nanny Agency began providing substitutes to five centers and preschools in McLean County. As of June 30, the substitute bank has had 285 requests for substitutes and a 90 percent success rate at filling the positions. Twenty-six substitutes have worked 2,126 hours through the substitute bank. The demonstration project continues through December 2003.

The child care centers that participated in the demonstration project did not pay a subscriber fee as was initially proposed, but they did pay a user fee per time a substitute was used. The substitutes are paid directly by the centers. In addition, the centers are charged \$15 each day a substitute is requested. For those situations where a substitute is needed for a week or longer, the centers receive a reduced rate of \$10 per day after the first three days. The user fee is capped at \$150 per month per substitute even if the substitute works every day during the month.

If a center wants to hire a substitute, the substitute must first work three months for the bank before they are eligible to be hired by a center. The center then pays a “buy out fee” to the Substitute Bank, which is used for ongoing recruit-

ment of additional substitutes. All fees to the centers were based on the cost that center directors estimated it costs them to hire a temporary or permanent employee. Center directors estimated that it cost them on average \$650 in time and expense to bring on a new employee, including all costs from recruiting to orientation. The fee structure of the Substitute Bank was designed to be a cost savings to centers.

ECCEP members and participating centers have been pleased with the demonstration project and the success the Substitute Bank has had in recruiting candidates and filling requests. The group intends to make improvements in the bank as feedback from both substitutes and centers is reviewed.

Participants ECCEP

The Early Childhood Care and Education Partnership (ECCEP) is comprised of Illinois State University and its laboratory schools, Heartland Community College, Bloomington School District #87, Normal School District Unit #5, the Illinois Network of Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies (INCCRRA), the local Child Care Resource and Referral Network (CCRRN), McLean County Health Department, McLean County Association for the Education of Young Children, and The Nanny Agency, Inc.