

# Ep #320: Substitute Teacher Support: Key Insights for Principals with Megan Conklin



## Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

Angela Kelly

## **Ep #320: Substitute Teacher Support: Key Insights for Principals with Megan Conklin**

Hello empowered principals. Welcome to episode 320.

Welcome to *The Empowered Principal® Podcast*, a not so typical educational resource that will teach you how to gain control of your career and get emotionally fit to lead your school and your life with joy by refining your most powerful tool, your mind. Here's your host certified life coach Angela Kelly Robeck.

Hello, hello my empowered principals. How are you today? Happy Tuesday. I am thrilled to be introducing a brand new friend of mine. Her name is Megan Conklin. She lives in the state of Washington. We are here to talk about something that you will be highly interested and intrigued to hear more information about. Today, we're going to talk about substitutes.

I can remember back in the day when I was leaving my school, we still had an actual human who would call the principal's between 5:00 and 6:00 a.m. and would let us know if we were down a sub. So this woman would spend her day hustling to get subs for everybody. If you didn't get the call, you knew that your classes were covered. If you did get the call, when the phone rang, you knew. You were just like oh. You knew it meant you had to sub or you had to split classes or you had to pull somebody from somewhere to get that class covered. It was so stressful.

Substitute teachers have become a very valuable resource. They've always been extremely valuable, but now we're feeling the pressure more than ever with people leaving the industry, with less people willing to sub, with all of the negativity around education and public schools and teaching and all of that. You guys know the drill.

But Megan is here to offer you tips and strategies and some advice on ways, simple, simple, easy ways that you can cultivate and nurture relationships with your substitutes to invite them in, to make them feel welcome, to give them the tools they need to be successful, and to sustain

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them in wanting to come back to serve your school over and over again. Welcome Megan to the podcast, and enjoy the show.

Angela: Hello, empowered principals, and welcome to today's podcast. We're so happy you're here, and I have a very special guest for you. I have my friend here, Megan Conklin. She lives up in Washington State. I'm down here in California. We actually met through the Empowered Principal® Facebook group.

So Megan was posting these posts in the Facebook group. I'm like what are these posts about? I don't know what's going on here. So I direct messaged her. I was like hey, tell me more about this. What's going on? We started chatting. I was like I actually want to learn more about who you are, what you do. You sound really interesting and amazing.

That's how we connected. So we got on a Zoom. It was instant friendship. I love her. I love her energy. I love what she's going to share with you today. Today, we're going to talk about subs. So Megan, welcome to the podcast.

Megan: Thank you, Angela. It's great to be here.

Angela: I am so excited about this. I love how quickly that connections can be made. You can be anywhere in the world and make this instant connection with somebody and just feel their energy and just feel you know them already. Megan's one of those people. I just love her and her spirit. So, Megan, can you, I'll stop gushing. Can you tell the listeners a little bit who you are, what you do, and how you stepped into the work that you're doing now?

Megan: Absolutely. So I became a teacher in 2001. The first part of my career, I was a middle and high school ELA teacher. I got my national board certification and adolescent ELA in 2005. I continued to work in the classroom. I loved being an English teacher. My parents were both English

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teachers. Both my sisters are English teachers. My brother was a journalist and now he works in politics, but he was the outlier. I really enjoyed that. Then my district started an instructional coaching program, as many did back in the I think it was 2011.

Angela: Yes. The 2010s, yes.

Megan: Back when everyone thought coaching was always about sports. No one understood what you were doing.

Angela: How far we've come.

Megan: The only context that we did spend a lot of time explaining what our work was. But we started an instructional coaching program in North Thurston Public Schools where I taught. I was the secondary lead. My colleague, Heather, was the elementary league. She's brilliant. It was wonderful to work with her.

When we left, we had 13 instructional coaches. When I left, we had 13 instructional coaches in our district. It was really meaningful work. I love working with adult learners. It's fascinating and challenging in a way that working with students is not. So that was really fun.

Then I decided to stay home. I have four children, and I spent a season at home with them. When I entered back into education, I did so as a sub, and I had never subbed. I learned very quickly that substitute teaching and classroom teaching are two totally different skill sets. I found out that I love being a substitute teacher. I have the personality for it. I value novelty over consistency. I'm bored easily. I enjoy something new every day. It's a fabulous job. So I really enjoyed it.

Then we had the pandemic, which stopped everything, and I stayed home and homeschooled my kids with my husband. Then I went back to subbing

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when online learning went back into in person learning, and everything had changed. We, in Washington, on boarded 1,600 emergency certified substitute teachers, many of whom had no background in education. The landscape of subbing got really different.

I realized that we had a lack of support in place, especially for those emergency certified subs. So we decided to create some support, and we created sub communities, gathering spaces for substitute educators. really what it is, is a PLC for subs. It's nothing revolutionary.

We think about being classroom teachers, could you ever have survived without your fellow teachers? I mean, could you have survived without talking to them and debriefing the day and talking about that.

Troubleshooting with that. What do you do that works with her? What do you?

Subs do not have that opportunity. They never are in another room, very rarely with another sound where they intentionally get to have those conversations and get better at their job. So that's what we designed. So sub communities, we gather in a local community center usually and catered by a local restaurant. We spend the first half hour intentionally eating together and connecting.

Angela: I love that.

Megan: And talking, just you do in your classroom with your students. When you're setting up your classroom at the beginning of the year, you don't dive right into whatever your content is. You spend time getting to know each other and connecting and figuring out who your learners are. That's what we do in sub communities just for the first little chunk of time.

Then we focus on a topic that's relevant and important to subs. So usually, our first one is how to connect quickly in the classroom because you don't

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have time, and you don't have relationship. So it has to be really quick. I'm going to connect with you. You have a kitten on your shirt. I have a new kitten at home. Those kinds of little connections that you can make with kids that tell them you're safe, and you're human, and they can hang out with you for a day. So that's usually one topic.

Other topics, obviously, meeting challenging behaviors as a sub. What does that look like? How does it look different than it does when you're a classroom teacher because it really does. So anyway, we have a focus topic. We talk about that.

Then embedded throughout the gathering, we are modeling. The facilitators are modeling high yield, replicable, instructional strategies, behavior management strategies, classroom management, collaborative learning strategies that those subs can then use the very next day when they sub in a classroom. That's what it's been, and it's been really fun and exciting.

Angela: Oh, okay. You just shared so much. I have to break this down because I want to highlight all the gold nuggets that you just dropped. So first of all, you said that well, I want to just highlight something to point it out. Because I think that we want to actually celebrate you because you said oh, it's not revolutionary.

But it is revolutionary because nobody, at least to my knowledge, has thought to create a PLC environment for substitute teachers. In my district, that wasn't a thing. I know in other districts that wasn't a thing. I work with people all across the country that it's not a thing.

What I do hear is subs are scarce. The pool is low, and the people that are in the pool aren't that great. It was just all this kind of negativity around subs and all this stress and all this worry and pressure around finding subs, maintaining subs.

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But what I also heard you say at the beginning was that the skill set, and I think this is important to point out. The skill set for hiring a gen ed or SPED classroom teacher, a permanent teacher, is not the same skill set required for high quality substitute teachers.

Megan: There might be crossover.

Angela: Of course. Like you said, the example that you use was so beautiful because you said they don't have the time. They don't have all school year to slowly acclimate and get to know kids and their families and their interests and their backgrounds. They have a few hours at most with these kids. So they've got to make that connection and create safety and certainty for those students in that classroom and develop a certain level of trust within the first minutes. Right?

Megan: Yeah. Absolutely. That looks different, and it sounds different. The thing I think that really resonates about this PD that we give this sub community is that it's so sub specific. Because I think a lot of times districts just don't have the time to design or deliver subspecific PD.

So they let the subs maybe join the teacher PD, which is, I do not want to denigrate that. Please let your subs join the teacher PD. Because even if you're doing that, you're leaps and bounds ahead of most districts. Subs need different PD. They need specific PD to being, like you said, a short term visitor in the classroom.

Angela: Yeah, it's almost you need to treat the position of substitute teacher as its own position, and have it at the same level, honor it at the same level as you would as a classroom teacher. I'm going to say if you think about the value provided, it is the same value.

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When you don't have a sub, you highly desire one. I know as a principal, one of my biggest, I would wake up early because we used to have this old system where they would actually call us to say.

Megan: Oh, I remember.

Angela: You knew if the phone rang, right? You knew if the phone rang before 6:00 a.m., you didn't have a sub. You're like oh God. Then it was on the site principal to figure out what to do. Whether that was you sub it yourself, you find somebody to sub it on campus, you redistribute kids. It was always a headache. Yes, but you had to have supervision no matter what.

Megan: Yes. In my experience, the people who care about subs, because I've doing this for a lot of years now. The people that care about subs the most are principals and office professional.

Angela: Yes.

Megan: Because their job is impacted in a major way when there aren't.

Angela: Yes, yes.

Megan: Students. We forget about students. Students really care. Some of the data out of, we've been partnering. Because I should say, I started this work. Then our local union, the Washington Education Association, came alongside and funded all of the work that I'm talking about.

So when we started, we were doing in my colleague, who was also an instructional coach and a teacher with me, in her restaurant that she owns back room that they let us use for free. The subs would come and buy their



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own food and and their own alcohol. We would just talk about these subjects. Everyone was confused by what we were doing.

We were doing it because I was out there subbing next door to people who didn't have the most basic classroom management strategies, and I would teach them this. They would look at me like I was Jesus walking on water because I gave them one little tool that changes your life. I mean, we have to be honest. Attention getters can change your life in the classroom.

Angela: Yes.

Megan: So we were doing it just to help. But then because I mentioned I'm a national board certified teacher, and I used to work with the union, our union, we have a really strong union. They noticed what we were doing, they came alongside, and they offered to fund it. So now we can gather in a community center.

Angela: Oh, nice.

Megan: It's way more accessible to so many different humans. Now, we can use a local restaurant to cater, and nobody has to buy their own food. So you feel, as a substitute, teachers often will get some, you'll get PD where you get a little perk, and they maybe give you food. You feel a little bit honored, like you mentioned. You feel like a professional.

We love treating subs like professionals. So getting dinner while you get to sit and talk about your job makes you feel like a professional. So I really want to mention that our union, Washington Education Association, has helped with all, has basically structured a lot of this. Then we also got it through a grant from our state, from our OSPI. So that's where the money's coming from. I think that's really important to mention because we need people at the state level to acknowledge that substitutes are really important.

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Angela: Yes, we do. It is basically, I feel like, at the district level and site levels, it feels a crisis right now because they were not able to. I remember in the over the summer and in the fall, people did not even have their full time positions completely filled, let alone have a pool for subs.

Megan: We're starting the year. Many schools across this country are starting the year with multiple long term subs in place who may or may not be qualified and supported and have the background they need. I mentioned substantial in working with the union, but we also have been partnering with a nonprofit, actually out of California, Southern California. Some of their data says that students on average, a K-12 student in America, will spend one full year with a substitute teacher.

Angela: That's incredible.

Megan: That's impactful. A full year of their education will be with a sub. So I think we need to support our subs.

Angela: Yes. This is one of the reasons I invited Megan on to the podcast because I think substitutes or finding subs, hiring subs, maintaining them, and really cultivating and nurturing them. I think, one, we're so busy as principals running around, we're maybe not thinking from the perspective of the sub.

But we're also not acknowledging the value of taking the time to nurture and cultivate our substitute teachers, treating them as a very valuable member of our staff, treating them as important, as equal, as valuable as the rest of the members of this team, and bringing them on as a team member.

Megan's got some great tips on what you can do. Listen today, implement tomorrow, tips and strategies for principals. But then also, we're going to talk about how you can start to plant seeds and to create conversations

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around the work that the state of Washington is doing in terms of supporting their substitute. What would you call this? It's a like I feel it's a substitute development plan.

Megan: Yeah, it's called the Emergency Substitute Teacher Program.

Angela: Nice.

Megan: From Washington Education Association. There's a few facets to it. It's not just our sub communities. Our sub communities are the in person part. That's what I love. I love the gatherings. I love designing gatherings and PD and just gathering in rooms with humans.

We have other people working on online options. Because in a lot of rural parts of Washington, you can't get to these gatherings. It's a logistics thing. So there's online PD for subs that's also synchronous. So, real people answering real questions. All of this is funded through the union and through the state. So it's important to know that this is free PD for all of these people who are accessing it. Substitutes don't make a living wage. We could have a whole podcast about that.

Angela: Yes, we could.

Megan: But because of that, I've been super passionate. I'm a public education person. I've just been passionate about making sure that no sub would ever have to pay for this. That this is something that's really acceptable for them.

Angela: Right. Because what we, and as districts or as states, we put our money in what we value. If we value our subs, we are going to provide the basic essential services that they need to be the best version of themselves and provide that professional development and to provide the food and the perks with that so that they can feel at the same level as classroom

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teachers. And receive the support and the mentorship, the instruction that they need to serve your school in the best way possible. Right?

So there's that going on at the state level. For those of you who are on Facebook, join the Empowered Principal® Facebook group because Megan's in there posting all of you know this information. So she's going to be giving tips and strategies that you can implement at your site with the subs you have right now. There doesn't have to be this fully fleshed out program for you to get started. So Megan, can you just start talking about some of those tips that people can walk away with today and implement tomorrow?

Megan: Absolutely because it is a systemic problem, and we need systemic change. But a lot of that might be outside your influence of control as a principal. So I want to tell you as a substitute teacher because I want to point out I currently practice as a sub. That's one of the things I love about my work is I get to stay in the classroom. I'm subbing at least once a week. So I know what it feels out there to be a sub right now.

One of the really big things I think principals have a lot of influence over is some of the celebratory and motivational things we do as principals to motivate our staff, right? I know that right now because of burnout a lot of principals are thinking about those things. They're thinking about sort of what do I do to motivate my staff? Maybe it's apple, I feel like a ton of them, or at least in my district, did those apple bars. Those cute little apple, you know what I'm talking about where you dip caramel apples?

Angela: Yes. Yes, yes.

Megan: So when you have one of them, or you play a game, like around the holidays, sometimes they'll play little motivational games with them. Include your subs. You have to be really intentional about including them. I'm a former classroom teacher. I know a lot of people in my district, and I

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still need to be invited to the staff brunch if I'm there, if I happen to be subbing that day. If you have little giveaways, make sure, and you're going to keep the one for the teacher who was absent that day, but have a few extra to give to your subs. Those are tiny little things.

A bigger kind of harder one is what I call the substitute shuffle. This is when you have a sub who takes a job in your building. Let's say they take a second grade position, and they are coming in. They take it the night before. They're planning to come in and sub in that second grade classroom.

But then overnight, your hardest kindergarten classroom teacher is sick. She tells you she can't come in. That second grade classroom has a student teacher. So you, being the genius principal you are, start shuffling things around. You ask that, you start maybe moving things, and this happens to us a lot of subs.

I want to say there's subs that are open to it. I'm usually open to it. I'm find being moved last minute. A lot of subs, especially those emergency certified subs, they get ready for the position that they're going to take. I encourage them to look up this, look up thought. Get some ideas. Second grade, okay I'm going to have a few back pocket tricks for second grade.

If they get moved at the last minute, it can be credibly dysregulating for them. So principals, and I know sometimes it's beyond your control. But if there's a way you can honor the position that the sub accepted on whatever your Frontline, Red Rover, Aesop programming is. I think it's all the better.

Angela: Yeah, that brings up such an important point that even though they are not maybe a regular, when I say a permanent regular staff member, it still means they're a human. We want to take into consideration. Because I know most principals that I work with anyway are so considerate of their

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staff, the amount of work, and just the workload, the pressure, the ask, all of that stuff. They try to keep all of that in mind.

We have to remember that when subs walk in the door, they're not just an object that is fulfilling a need that we have so that we don't have to sub or we don't have to hustle to figure out a solution. They're a human being in front of us. If we want to honor that and to, if we want to basically create a welcoming environment where they want to come and work at our school, and they are delighted to come back and say yes to people at our school and to work on our campus. We want to take that into consideration.

At the very least, pull that person aside and say hey, here's the situation. I had the second grade. That classroom has a student teacher. Would you be willing to or are you comfortable with?

Megan: Raise it as a question.

Angela: Yes. At least give them the option to think about it or to say actually, I really prepared for second grade. I'm a little nervous to shift gears. Allow them to tell you the truth and be okay with the answer. Because the truth is that if that sub wasn't coming in, if you had your second grade teacher available, you wouldn't pull your second grade teacher to go sub the class because she has a student teacher, right? But you might ask your student teacher to be courageous and go take the class. I don't know, depending on the legalities of all of that but.

Megan: Well, both situations are totally illegal, but it happens and that's inevitable.

Angela: But it happens.

Megan: It's what the staff shortage situation is right now.

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Angela: Yes. It's the reality of the job. We are being a little more flexible because the top priority is student safety and supervision. We need adults overseeing kids. So I know that there has been maybe the boundaries have been a little more flexible and gray in this post-pandemic era of teaching. But you do, as a principal, have to get very creative because you can't always be the one who subs, and you can't always be, you can't pull the instructional coach every single time or the resource teacher. I know people have done some wild things to get their classes covered.

Megan: What I'm seeing, and this is more of a secondary situation, is and I give the example of my brother-in-law who's a middle school history teacher. He's fabulous. The year after, so it wasn't the year we went back in person, but the next year here in Washington, and we were out for a long time just California.

Angela: Yeah.

Megan: There was such a sub shortage in his district he missed, I believe it was 71 planning periods in a row.

Angela: Oh, wow.

Megan: If you're a secondary person out there, you know what that means.

Angela: Yes.

Megan: The elementary equivalent would be if you never got your enrichment. If never got any of that enrichment planning. It's your planning time. 71. My brother-in-law teaches middle school, and he will never leave a group of 11 year olds alone in a classroom. He's a teacher. He's an educator. Will never do that. He will quit his job if it becomes that unsustainable, and that's where subbing intersects with teacher retention.

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I think that's a really important thing for principals to remember. Is that the link between really supporting your substitute teachers. When you're supporting your subs, you are supporting your teachers. You are telling your teachers. You can get sick. You can take care of your family. We will have a sub pool that is supported and taken care of that will be there for you.

I have teachers calling me on the way to the hospital with kids with ruptured appendix begging me to sub the next day because, these are kindergarten teachers. Kindergarten teachers know that you can't just have any sub.

Angela: Yes, this is true. I was a kindergarten teacher.

Megan: Yes. They care about your baby so much. You are in a very special group of people. But those kindergarten teachers, it breaks my heart because that's not their job. Her job right then was to take care of her daughter.

Angela: Yes.

Megan: So there's a breakdown here, and we need to fix it for our teachers for our teachers and for our subs.

Angela: Right. Right. Do you have any other, I know you and I talked about this the other day, but do you have any other ideas or tips that they could? Because what we're doing here in this conversation is just creating awareness, planting seeds around thoughts to be thinking about when your subs come in.

You and I were talking about the other day where from the minute they walk in, having a welcoming, inviting environment in the office. Perhaps having folders for subs at the site level that teach them here are the school wide procedures and whatever, the essentials they need to know. I want you to



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speaking to you that the example you had or the situation you faced when if there was a lockdown or a there was a code red or something happened where there was no phone and there was no way to yeah.

Megan: Yeah. There's so many different examples here. So just safety wise, that's a big concern. You mentioned it. We forget our subs. That's the thing about subs is they're incredibly forgettable. We know that about ourselves. We're okay with it.

But when it comes to health and safety, so I was in a high school classroom, and there was a lockdown. There was an announcement over the intercom saying teachers check your email so that you can know what's happening. I don't have an email there. I don't have a computer there. My phone doesn't work because of the everything's blocked.

So you've put us in a genuinely, it was a drill. Had it not been, it could have been a genuinely, and scary situation. I would say emotionally, it was a scary situation. That's a hard situation to be in.

Angela: Yeah. But those are the kinds of things that we want to bring light.

Megan: Awareness.

Angela: And awareness into because.

Megan: One of the things that we're doing, and this is another systemic. So I'm bouncing. One that we just held, and we're calling them subposiums because I making up cool names. We're holding subposiums. These are gatherings for substitute connected professionals.

So if your district is small, you, as the principal, might be that substitute connected professional and who's in charge of the subs, or you might have

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a district large enough to have a sub coordinator. Or you might have an HR person, or you might contract. Whatever it is.

We held a gathering for those humans, those adults in the district to work with subs and support subs. They all got together in the same room for the first time ever, regionally. They got to brainstorm and talk about what could we do? They came up with these amazing ideas. It really speaks to the power of gathering people together and letting them use their collective wisdom to brainstorm and troubleshoot.

The ideas that they came up with to support their subs were phenomenal. Just sending them resources. I said just go out to a school site and meet some of them. Meet your subs. Be an actual human who says, "Hi, I'm glad you're substitute teaching here." All of those things can have great impact.

The other thing that really surprised me, I mean, I don't know if it surprised me. But my favorite part of this job is I get to give leadership opportunities to substitute teachers. That rarely happens. There's something about being strength based that magically changes a thing. You mentioned it early Angela in our conversation where you said something about how we just always think about the deficits that subs bring. We do. We think of them as less than. We think of them as not a real teacher. We think of them as flaky. I don't know. We have all sorts of stereotypes around subs.

When you treat subs like valued professionals, when you tap into their strength, it is unbelievable how it can transform your school building or your school district. One of the gatherings that we do is called What's Your Sub Superpower? Everyone gets to decide what is the thing that makes them a great sub.

It's so different. These are such a group of diverse humans. Age diversity, background diversity. Lots of subs have other jobs because it isn't, like we mentioned, it's not a living wage job. Just really interesting. But when you

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let subs focus on their strengths and you give them leadership opportunities in your building, it's so empowering for them. You might just find that you have amazingly skilled subs that you haven't been utilizing.

Angela: Yes. What I love about what you said is that it just requires the principals and the staff to just have the awareness enough to be mindful of bringing that teacher in, smiling at them, sharing with them, inviting them into the staff lounge for the potlucks.

Here's when I was listening to you speak, I thought it takes zero more effort, zero more effort to do that than it does to not do that. There's no more time or effort required to say hey, come join us in the staff lounge. Or hey.

Megan: It's a mindset is what it is.

Angela: Yes, that's it. But it's not. I think when people think of oh, that's so much more work, the brain is going to say oh, that's so much more work to have to think of the sub. It's not. It's actually less work. It doesn't require any more effort or energy on your part to invite them in, to welcome them, to add a couple extra gifts to the list for make sure we have enough in case we have subs that day, to include them in the Secret Santa drawing or whatever, right?

Megan: Acknowledge their strengths. If you know that you have a sub who subbed a few times in kindergarten, let's say, and man, did they crush it. Nobody, maybe only 18 kids cried, whatever your litmus test is for kindergarten. Give them that feedback.

One of the things that I don't about subbing is I love feedback. I don't get any. My feedback 100% comes from my students, which is great. But as a sub, I don't get feedback from anybody unless it's negative. Unless I mess it up.

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Angela: Right.

Megan: Because they're not in there. They're not seeing the things that I do. So if you could figure out a way to give feedback to your subs, even if it's just a quick email saying oh, I heard that you had a great day in Mr. Sam's class today. Thanks so much. Those tiny little moves can completely change that person.

Or acknowledging I noticed that you're really great with the fifth graders. We have someone who's having surgery coming up. Would you be interested? Acknowledging those strengths. Then you can help them along. If you notice that they're pretty good with the fifth graders, but they might need a little support in this area, provide that support. Give them the opportunity to get better. That's a gift that you can give to your subs.

Angela: Yeah, because what this really is, it's a shift from just needing somebody with a beating heart to cover the class versus building an actual relationship, connection and relationship with that person. So they're not just there one time, one and done. They actually, they are a part of the school community. It's a different way of thinking about subs.

One of the things you said about giving them feedback, it made me realize it's very important for principals. I think one of the things, the misconceptions we have is oh, that class is covered by a sub so I don't need to go in there. I can go check on my other classrooms because I need to be seen. I need to connect with my staff.

I would venture to say one of the easiest things you can do as a principal is to ask the person who's taking care of subs, whether that's your secretary or you've got a sub person or whatever, which classrooms have subs today and then make a point to walk through those classrooms first and check in. Hi, how are you? Thanks for showing up. Thanks for subbing in our school. Really appreciate it. Just acknowledging that they came in and filled a very

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valuable component of your school campus. Just that alone signifies thoughtfulness.

Megan: Absolutely. Don't just stop there. Talk about this at a staff meeting, or send out an email with a few tips for your teachers for how we could change the culture in our building to make it more sub friendly. I sub at school, local school here, Tumwater High School, and they have a substation when you first walk in. It's specific for the subs. It's adorable. I love the name because I names was sub in it.

It has a little coffee pot, and there's hot coffee for you. There's a list of all of the important phone numbers in that school, which saves your life every time. They post our flyers for sub communities that we have locally. It's just a, then it has the computer where you sign in. It has the badges that you can put on that identify you as a sub. So when a teacher is walking down the hall, they can say, "Hey, welcome to our school."

I just think all those little touches so that it's really clear for subs. Because nothing's clear to us. I mean, you think everything's clear, but nothing is clear. It's very muddy when you're walking into a new environment every day.

Angela: Especially at different schools, right? A different school or a different grade level. Every little nuance is different.

Megan: So, I have one school that they make you give them your keys. Did I tell you about that story?

Angela: No. Your own personal keys?

Megan: So, I have to say the reason they started this rule was probably people me who walk away with the keys. I've done that, but I always bring them back.

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Angela: Oh.

Megan: They make you trade your keys.

Angela: You trade the keys.

Megan: I understand why they're doing it, but I'm here to tell you that doesn't make your building feel sub friendly. The subs around town don't like it. Think about it. Like you said, humanize yourselves. They're human beings. They're grown adults definitely, and they're valued professionals. So if you can shift your mindset to that and start thinking of your substitutes of assets, I just think it can really change things.

Angela: Yeah, I was just thinking, as a principal, I should have been asking for my teacher's keys.

Megan: Yeah. Right? I did it as a teacher too. I haven't changed at all. It's exactly the same.

Angela: Oh, that's hilarious. Oh, that is, okay. So that is kind of funny. No, I would not want somebody taking my keys. That's funny.

Megan: It doesn't feel great. You feel like a child.

Angela: It feels a little condescending.

Megan: It clearly says that you're not one of them. It says your, you know, it's otherings. So I think anything you can do to do the opposite of othering. Create belonging. Show them they belong. You belong. Just for today, you belong.

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Angela: Yeah, I love the substation. One of the things I wanted to say, I think this was a part of our conversation the other day, but this idea of making sure that in every classroom, one, there's a working phone.

Then two, you've got to look at your policies or procedures, but having somewhere in large print in case of emergency call this number. A number that is going to be picked up no questions asked by somebody on that campus, whether it's a cell phone or an office number that's always answered. Somewhere where if there is an emergency that because you don't necessarily have access to computer or certainly not district email.

Megan: I was just thinking one of the activities we did with our substitute coordinators is I, we've done a lot of survey data in Washington State because this is being funded through a grant from OSPI, the state has surveyed emergency certified substitute teachers and regular substitute teachers and collected a ton of data about what matters to them.

So I went through all of that data and compiled a top 10 list of what are the top 10 biggest challenges for substitute teachers in Washington state. That safety conversation that we had, that was one of them. I will say, I want to throw out a few more of those because I think this would be interesting.

Angela: Yeah, this is great.

Megan: One of the top three, I can't remember where it was, is no sub plans. We do a whole sub community gathering on, it's called No Sub Plans, what to do when there's nothing to do. We do a game in the first thing we do because I'm a big movement person. So we play four corners with those, and we labeled the four corners. So we're, again, modeling high yield instructional strategies because you can play four corners with any content, right?

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So if you're a sub and you walk in, and there's no sub plans, your first response is to go next door to the next door neighbor teacher and ask what to do, go to corner one. If you're a sub and you come in, there's no sub plans, and you go back to the front office, and you ask them. Are there any universal sub plans? What can I do? You go to corner two.

If you are a sub like me and when there are no sub plans, you get very excited because you love to go to, go to corner number three. If when you see no sub plans, you turn around and go home, go to corner number four. We have everyone go to their corners, and they all have these hilarious discussions about what do you do when there's nothing to do?

As a principal, you have some control over that. You can do some double checking around that. You could have some universal sub plans for the different developmental levels in your building. I do think there's some structures you could really put in place that would help with that. That is one of the top 10 challenges that we face.

Angela: Yeah. It's funny because I remember being a teacher where we were required to have an unanticipated sick day planner.

Megan: Yeah, same.

Angela: Yes, we had that. As much as I tried to make it comprehensive, and I had information about all the students and IEPs and all the information, it never felt it was robust enough to really give the sub something that felt like I had truly planned.

Because it was, on a day, I knew I was going to be out I could make concrete plans. But for that, yeah, if my son woke up in the night sick, and I had to stay home with him, I knew they were doing those kind of mediocre plans, but at least it was something structured like a schedule.



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Megan: You would be surprised how wonderful and mediocre something can feel if you're out of your depth when it comes to content or developmental level.

Angela: Yes.

Megan: So yeah, I think having those available can be really meaningful. I'm thinking about some of the other big challenges. Technology is one that we talk about a lot, and I do think we have some control over that. In my district, there's no access to technology unless you somehow set it up. So if I'm subbing for a teacher friend, and I say can you leave your laptop so I can do a GoNoodle.

Angela: Like if this classroom teacher knew you.

Megan: Yeah. But then in the neighboring school district, every sub gets issued a laptop, and you always have access to technology. So guess which district has more of a sub shortage?

Angela: Yeah, exactly.

Megan: The one that doesn't pay attention to technology. So, again, that might be something that your district would need to tackle, but there might be a way that you could work with your teacher librarian in your building to say, "Hey, every time a sub comes in, we're going to get them a laptop so that when kids are bouncing off the walls, they can show and GoNoodle, and everybody can get their wiggles out and go back to the designed plan."

Angela: Yeah, I mean I think it's not out of the question to have two or three just laptops in the office when the sub checks in, whether it's at the sub station or whatever. Your secretary could be here's your folder, here's your keys. Here's your folder, here's a Chromebook or a computer, enough to get you something through the day.

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Megan: And a login and password. Make sure you give them a login and password.

Angela: Yeah, just enough. Because especially, my niece just moved out here from Iowa. She's actually a sub. So this is where you and I were talking. But I have been listening to her experience as she's a long term sub right now. But no technology, no lesson plans, all the things you've said. She doesn't feel very welcomed by the team.

It's almost the teachers are tight, and they're in their little group. Then she feels an outsider. It's only her second or third week. So she's just acclimating. She's doing her best to meet people, but inclusivity feels a little bit of an issue, like a welcomeness there. But the technology for her was really a struggle.

She was supposed to show this movie. It was the culminating activity of some project that the group was working on. Her class didn't see it but the other ones did. So she was just all stressed out about it. But she made it happen. She brought her own laptop, and just showed them.

Megan: That's what subs are having to do.

Angela: Yes. Oh my gosh.

Megan: I think if you can remove some of that friction, it doesn't, like you were saying it, this doesn't have to be where, I mean, I want subs to be paid more, but this does not even have to cost money. It doesn't even have to be something you add on. It can be some piece of friction that you're removing so that you can have a better experience. That's what you're doing when you provide access to technology. You're just removing a real big piece of friction that makes subbing incredibly hard.

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Angela: Yeah, exactly. Oh, my gosh, so good. So is there anything else? As we're wrapping up, is there any other brilliance that you can share? So we've talked about little things that can be done. One thing we were going to talk about was there are things within a principal's control, right?

Things that principal can do or do at a site level that can enhance the experience of a sub and nurture them and invite them back into a more long term relationship where they're subbing, and they're interested in subbing at that site. Let's talk about seeds that can be planted in terms of conversations about possibility as it relates to creating systemic change when it comes to having subs available at maybe a district level.

Megan: Absolutely. I think, you said, it's that awareness. So one of the things that we talked about in substitute teaching is the missing manager syndrome. In a lot of areas, mine included, there's simply nobody in charge of subs in the district. Everybody thinks. It's kind of like when you're, I parent a lot of kids. So I had this experience when I would go to the park with other parents, right? There'd be a lot of kids, but there'd be a lot of adults. So you kind of feel somebody's watching the kids.

Angela: Right.

Megan: You're not 100% who's watching the kids. I think that's what's happening in substitute teaching. Everyone's assuming somebody else is in charge of the subs, and nobody's in charge. Nobody's thinking about the subs.

Angela: That's so good.

Megan: So I just think the first step is, like you said, just that awareness of there are so many small moves that we can make to support our substitute teachers. Then I can't stress enough how transformative these PDs have been. Just giving subs the opportunity to be in the same room with people

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who do their same job to talk about how do we get better at our jobs? That is just essential for any job.

Because of the transient nature of substitute teaching, because of the drop in nature, because you're going from place to place, that's just never ever offered. So if you can figure out a way to offer that the way we have, I think you will find your substitute pools totally transformed.

I want to say that this doesn't stop at subbing because your substitute pool, those are your future teachers. So when we talk about growing our, because we have a teacher shortage that we're dealing with too. Not just a substitute teacher shortage. I'm working with some districts around Washington who are very wise when it comes to knowing that their substitute teacher pool is probably where their future teachers are going to come from.

Angela: Of course.

Megan: When you support those humans, you're supporting your future teachers. You're supporting your future students. So, I think, again, if we can shift our mindset to look at ourselves as these valuable, wonderful resources, it can really change our districts.

Angela: So, so good. So if listeners want to learn more about what Washington state is doing and then spark conversations of whatever state or county that they are serving in anywhere across the nation, where can they go to find more information?

Megan: Okay, well, I have social medias, and its Conklin Educational Perspective. I don't know why I named it that. I just looking at things from all the different angles. So that's my social media. That's kind of where I posts things. I'm working on a website.

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Angela: Well, they can come on into the Facebook group because you're posting there.

Megan: They can see there. But really if they want to look at some, I mean, the real work, the systemic work that's being done is being done, again, like I said, through a grant from our Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction that is for emergency certified subs and then through the Washington Education Association. You can link it in your show notes, but Washington Education Association has a whole web page dedicated to emergency substitute teachers and here's how we're supporting them. So you can just go through that.

Angela: Yeah. We'll be sure to put that link in the show notes. I just hope this podcast is a spark to ignite conversation one, with your teachers, two, with your peers, your other principals, your district office. For those of you who are, some of you are really connected maybe at the county level.

You're working with the, like here in Santa Clara County, you might be working with the Santa Clara County Office of Education. Talking to people there and asking them what are the ideas or movements that are happening in the realm of cultivating substitutes for short term, long term, and then almost as a pipeline into developing full time teaching positions for these people.

Megan: It's a pathway. I think it's a pathway that's been overlooked in education. I want to also mention that the other thing that the WEA is doing right now kind of with the same grant is a brand new teacher residency program.

Angela: Oh, yeah.

Megan: Where it's a paid teacher residency. It's specifically for special education teachers because we have a huge special education teacher

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shortage in Washington state right now. It's incredibly innovative and amazing. The entire program is taught by practicing SPED teachers. So I don't know about you, but when I became a teacher, the people who trained me to be a teacher hadn't been in the classroom for a good 30 years.

Angela: Correct.

Megan: That's just how it used to be. This program is turning that whole idea on its head, and it's really exciting. So check out that, the WEA Teacher Residency Program.

Angela: That is amazing. I know for sure in California, that's also an issue, which is if it's happening in these two states, I'm sure it's happening across other states as well. So look at the residency program for the special education training. I love that that's a residency program where they actually get paid, and they get paid for student teaching you said?

Megan: They do. It's not a lot, but it's a kind of a.

Angela: A stipend maybe?

Megan: No, it's a living wage.

Angela: Oh.

Megan: Yes. Because they got funding from the state, it's amazing. It's really, it's the first of its kind in the nation. Yeah, the fact, for me, the real kicker is that it's taught by practicing special education teachers. As a special education teacher, I know how quickly things change. I know how COVID impacted our classrooms. All of our classrooms, but especially our SPED classrooms. So it just gives me great hope when I get to see this

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teacher residency program supporting new, amazing, diverse special education teachers.

Angela: Oh, I love it. I might have to move to Washington.

Megan: You might have to. We do a good job with education here.

Angela: You do.

Megan: California does too. I mean, I think we're kind of in usually on the same page.

Angela: Yes, no, we definitely are. I think California just moves a little bit slower. It's a lot bigger, a lot more bureaucracy. But prior to COVID, I worked with AWSP, I did a keynote up there and some workshops for the, let's see, Association of Washington School Principals. I worked with Gina Yonts. Actually she's been on this podcast.

I just think Washington is doing a fabulous job of being innovative, creative, and really trying to move the needle not just forward but in an entirely new direction. Creating new dimensions and new ways of thinking altogether about how to approach education in a way that meets the current needs of our current families and students.

Megan: Yeah, absolutely. I think the focus of especially working with WEA on inclusion and diversity and equity. I think having that as your foundation really matters. I love that they have that as their foundation. It just matters. We need to be inclusive.

Angela: We do. I love it. Thank you so much for your time today and your energy and all that you've shared with us. I look forward to working with you in the years to come. It's going to be so much fun to see how this develops.

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But listeners out there if you have any questions, please reach out to me or to Megan. We'll put all of the contact info in the show notes so that you can check it all out.

Megan: Thank you.

Angela: Thanks for being here.

Megan: That was so fun.

Angela: It was so fun. Yeah, we got to stay in touch.

Megan: Absolutely.

Angela: All right. Everyone have a great week, and we'll talk to you guys all next week. Take good care. Bye.

Megan: Bye.

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