



Strategies to Enhance Your Substitute Teaching

by Jeanie Gresham, John Donihoo, and Tanisha Cox

Don't squander away precious instructional time; a substitute's role is critical to student success.

Skillful substitute teachers are critical to student achievement, especially in today's high-stakes accountability environment. Because teachers are absent from duty, some for short periods of time and others for lengthy time frames, schools may find it difficult to meet high academic and accountability standards without prepared substitute teachers. Furthermore, with the implementation of the federal No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), school districts strive to ensure that all teachers—including substitutes—are highly qualified (Darling-Hammond and Berry 2006).

Even though NCLB does not require it, parents should expect that all substitute teachers have earned a bache-

lor's degree, hold full state certification, and have proven competency in the content areas they teach. In contrast, many districts permit individuals to substitute teach if they have had at least 30 hours of accredited college or university hours, show proof of their right to work in the United States, and pass a criminal history check.

At this time, because districts face such a serious need for substitutes, meeting the NCLB standards for all substitute teachers is not practical. Yet, substitute teachers can ensure student success and enhance the substituting experience by implementing the five effective strategies described here.

An Inexperienced Substituting Experience

I was 21 years old and hired to teach special education in the upcoming fall semester. It was May, days before the end of the school year, when I received a phone call. The principal exclaimed, "Would you like to substitute in our third grade? The teacher is ill and will not return this year. I thought it would be a good experience for you and help you prepare for your fall teaching assignment." Would I like to substitute? He must be kidding. I was not even a college graduate! Well, not wanting to make a bad impression, I agreed to substitute for the remaining four days of the school year. I rose early on the day that I was to arrive, dressed in what I thought was school-appropriate attire, grabbed my purse, and scurried off to my substitute teaching adventure. I walked into the classroom, and staring back at me was a group of 22, eager third-grade youngsters.

After looking around the room for something to do, I foraged the teacher's desk. Nothing was there—no lesson plans, no worksheets, nothing. What was I to do? A bookcase caught my eye. I grabbed a book and began

reading to the students. We read, talked, went to lunch, read, talked, and spent a rather lengthy period of time at recess. I was lucky because the students were very compliant and seemingly understanding of my inexperience. By the end of the day, I was exhausted. The bell rang, and a sweet, blonde, curly headed boy encouraged me to line up the students and prepare for bus dismissal.

After my students were packed safely onto their buses, I struggled back to the classroom, fell to the floor, and sighed. I thought to myself, "This must have been an extraordinarily long day. Teaching could not be this hard." I had never been so tired. Then, it dawned on me; I had three more days of this substitute teaching experience!

After more than 30 years in the education field, my thoughts return to my substitute teaching episode. My lack of experience now is quite humorous; I had no idea what a substitute teacher was to do. Years in the field have taught me to respect and to value qualified substitute teachers, for I learned how and what a substitute should do by observing masterful substitute teachers.

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Strategy One: Survey the Landscape

Getting to know your territory is vital. After you are hired by a district as a substitute teacher, obtain a list of the campuses you may serve, directions to those campuses, and the names of the campus principals. Take the initiative to contact each principal to schedule an

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on-site visit. The visit will allow you to investigate the campus and verify that it is a place you want to work, as well as provide the principal with an opportunity to become acquainted with you. Principals are more likely to contact someone who has exhibited initiative and the desire to learn about their campuses.

When you visit the principal, remember to dress professionally. As Wong and Wong (2005) suggested, blue jeans, loud prints, and casual clothes are inappropriate attire when you want to make a good first impression. Ask the principal whether you may obtain the school schedule, a school map, names of people to go to for help such as the nurse or librarian, and campus emergency information. The campus discipline policy and, if possible, each teacher’s discipline plan and daily schedule are important documents that you want to retrieve. Provide the principal with your schedule. Let him or her know when you are available and your areas of teaching expertise. Additionally, you want to inquire about what the principal expects from you, the substitute teacher.

In a positive manner, also familiarize the principal with what you expect from him or her. Having a mutual

understanding lays the foundation for success. Furthermore, it is a good idea to ask for a tour of the campus. The principal may not have the time to take you on a tour, but someone else may be eager to show you around.

After your site visit, make an effort to organize the documents you obtained so that they are easily accessed when you are contacted to teach. After you survey the landscape and orient yourself, setting the stage for success on your first day with students is the next imperative.

Strategy Two: Set the Stage for Success

Set the stage for success by preparing mentally and physically. Many times, you are given short notice. However, if you are contacted far enough in advance, be sure to review campus documents that you retrieved from the principal: management plan, map, contact names, emergency plans, and teacher’s classroom management plan and daily schedule.

On the morning that you are to report for duty, arrive early. Locate your room, scout out materials that are left for you by the classroom teacher, and organize the room for your students. Post the assignments for the day in a visible location. You are setting the stage to indicate that this is a business-as-usual day.

After the room is prepared for a successful day, move to the front of the room to greet students as they enter. Model courteous behavior: smile, greet them positively, and even consider shaking their hands as they enter the room (Wong and Wong 2005). You are modeling respectful behavior; students learn as much from what you do as from what you say (Anderson et al. 2005). Your stage is set for high behavioral expectations.

Strategy Three: Set High Behavioral Expectations

Setting high behavioral expectations begins with you. Just as you dress professionally to meet the campus principal, you want to dress professionally on school days. You gain respect from students beginning with your appearance. Of course, you want to be comfortable, but wear clean, pressed clothes that convey to students a professional image.

After you greet your students and they are settled in their desks or work areas, take time to engage in dialogue. Ask the students to share the expectations they have of you for the day. Next, ask them to describe what they think you require of them. This dialogue

leads seamlessly into a discussion of the guidelines for behavior.

If you have a classroom management plan from the teacher, you need to review this plan and allow students to explain each of the classroom rules. If no plan exists, it is mandatory for you to set the rules for the day. Usually, five clearly written rules are more than enough (Wong and Wong 2005). A rule that is acceptable distinctly states the behavior you expect. An example of a good rule is: Complete all assignments on time and with quality. A rule is specific, yet applies to many situations. After the rules are verbalized, post them in a visible location. You may consider having students sign the posted rules, conveying an overt commitment to follow them. With older students, you may opt to type the rules and pass out copies for students to sign and keep in their possession.

In addition to your five rules, you vocalize the consequences and rewards for the day. Consequences are events that occur if someone does not follow one of the stated rules. Some examples of consequences are: one, a verbal reminder; two, a nonverbal reminder; and three, a time out. Remember, consequences should be reasonable and logical.

Along with consequences, you voice rewards. Rewards are positive consequences that occur if students follow the class rules. These should not be items such as stickers or candy; you do not want to convey that treats are expended for doing what is expected. Rewards preferably are academic in nature: five extra minutes of math games, walking tours around the campus to locate different types of leaves, or extra time for a story read aloud. Now, your expectations are set; you are on your way to managing with confidence.

Strategy **Four**: Manage with Confidence

Setting behavioral expectations is only the beginning. The hard work comes in skillfully orchestrating your classroom. The work is manageable if you deliver clear and specific directions, praise along the way, and levy consequences and rewards consistently.

Give clear and specific directions. At times, teachers state multiple directions and expect students to follow them exactly. For many students, multiple directions are overwhelming. When giving directions, state one command at a time, allow students to implement the command, and move to the next command (Allen 2001). Following is an example of a method for administering clear, specific directions.

The teacher desires the students to stand, form working groups of four, read pages 10–15 in their textbook, and write a summary statement. The teacher says:

1. “Students, please stand up behind your chair with your social studies textbook.
2. Go.
3. Look about the room, and locate three other people to work on a project.
4. Go.
5. Groups, locate a place to work.
6. Go.
7. Read pages 10–15, and write a group summary statement paraphrasing the content in your text.
8. Go.”

Praise along the way. As you administer directions, scan the room to locate at least two individuals who have complied. Praise these students specifically. For example, when you have asked the students to take out their social studies book for a lesson, say some-

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thing like, “Mary, you did a great job preparing for our lesson. Your book is out on your desk. You are ready to go.” Mary knows that she has complied with your direction, and the other students know as well. You will be astonished at how many students will shuffle to comply after this praise is announced.

Praise another student; then quickly scan the room to see who has not complied. Next, administer your consequences. If your first consequence was a verbal reminder, calmly move to a noncompliant student, and quietly remind him or her of the violated rule. Be discreet. It is not your objective to embarrass the student; you just want to obtain his or her attention. If the behavior escalates,

calmly apply the second consequence. If the child persists, quietly ask that he or she go to time out, if that was your third consequence. When the student completes the time out, have a short chat with the student and ask the following questions:

1. What did you do?
2. What should you have done?
3. What will you do next time?
4. What will happen next time if you do not follow directions?

These questions allow students to reflect on their behavior and to connect their behavior with consequences.

Levy consequences and rewards consistently. More significant than consequences in a classroom discipline plan are rewards—positive consequences earned by the class. As stated earlier, it is preferable to implement rewards that have academic connections. At the beginning of the day, determine the end reward that is the goal for the day and the time of day that the class may obtain the reward. Set expectations for the end or ultimate reward. For example, you may set 20 tally marks as the goal for the class to achieve by a certain time. You reward behavior with posted tally marks as students follow directions. You are in charge. You sporadically reward students during the day. Keep them on their toes; they should not know when you will administer tally marks.

Use rewards to assist in encouraging students to exhibit respectful school behavior. At the appointed time, you and the class count the tally marks to see whether they have obtained the ultimate or end goal. If so, reward the class. Consistency in orchestrating classroom management sets the goal of high standards for behavior, just as preparing for the unexpected helps to keep you aligned with the main focus of your day—instruction.

Strategy Five: Prepare for the Unexpected

Ideally, the teacher will leave you detailed, explicit lesson plans that outline the content and activities you are to teach. However, that is not always the case. At times, you walk into classrooms where nothing is prepared. Each instructional day is important; not one moment must be squandered. To prevent loss of precious instructional time, always have emergency lesson ideas ready that are appropriate for a wide range of learners and grade levels. As you know, you may be contacted on the spur of the moment to substitute and may move to another campus and grade level the following day.

Sponge activities (short assignments designed to produce learning when the teacher is occupied completing administrative tasks), transition activities (quick tasks that gain student attention and focus them on the task at-hand), literature, and graphic organizers may prove to be useful emergency tools. A good teaching practice is to begin and end instructional segments with transitions and fill time gaps with sponge activities. An example of a sponge activity is, "Write all you know about . . ." Numerous Web sites offer a wide array of transitions and sponge activities. To find more information on sponge activities, go to a search engine, such as Google™ or Yahoo!®, and type in *sponge activities* or *transition activities* to retrieve helpful ideas.

In addition, bring a variety of literature books; many children's literature titles are appropriate for instruction with prekindergarten through grade 12 learners. For example, *The Wolf's Story: What Really Happened to Little Red Riding Hood* by Toby Forward and Izhar Cohen offers a great example about distinguishing the point of view in a story, which is a skill that can be reinforced at all grade levels.

Furthermore, familiarize yourself with graphic organizers that assist in reinforcing content. For example, if you walk into a classroom and notice that the civil war is a topic of study, a Venn diagram is a perfect tool to reinforce learning. Students can compare and contrast the reasons for the war according to the people in the North versus the people in the South. Marzano, Pickering, and Pollock (2001) have supported incorporating graphic organizers as useful means for constructing meaning and enhancing student achievement. Take advantage of numerous Web sites that provide explicit instructions for using graphic organizers. One such Web site is *edHelper.com*; this site provides an overview of the definition of graphic organizer as well as various examples. You can fill a day with worthwhile lessons, when at first glance the day seems lost.

Closing Thoughts

Though, at times, substitute teaching may seem overwhelming, it can be very rewarding. Each instructional day must count for students. When you look out at a group of eager youngsters, enrich your teaching experience by implementing strategies to ensure success. ■

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