

YOUR PERSONAL LEARNING GUIDE FOR

THE SUBSTITUTE TEACHER

By John Eller

THE
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Develop • Support • Honor



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About the Author



John Eller has had a variety of roles over the years within educational institutions. He has served as a substitute, a classroom teacher at both the elementary and secondary levels, a principal, an assistant superintendent for curriculum, a graduate-level instructor for teachers and administrators, and as Executive Director of the Minnesota ASCD. John has been honored for his work as a National Distinguished Principal and as state principal of the year. He is currently supporting educators in the areas of teaching and learning, employee evaluation, professional growth, and leadership.

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Introduction

Schools today face increasing pressures. In addition to an aging population of professional staff, we have more of a need to develop and retool existing teachers. When these professionals are absent from the classroom, the person called in to keep learning going is the substitute teacher. Emerging from relative obscurity only a few years ago into an essential position in school districts today, the substitute teacher provides an essential service to education. This position was once seen as a position to be filled exclusively by retired individuals, people seeking part-time employment, or those looking for temporary work. While a significant number of substitute teachers still fit this description, today's workforce is much more diverse. Some choose substitute teaching for traditional reasons, while others seek these positions as a way to learn and practice instructional skills, to gain a connection to a possible full-time teaching job, for the personal flexibility, or for a host of other reasons. Although the reasons for substituting may vary, most substitute teachers want to do a good job and make a positive contribution to the children they serve.

Over the years, individuals interested in substituting have had to learn their skills on the job, sometimes under extremely stressful conditions. School systems had not yet seen the benefits of providing high-quality training and development to part-time employees. Recently, however, there has been huge interest on the part of both systems and substitutes to provide staff development for these important teachers.

It is in this spirit of extended staff development that this training manual was developed. It is designed to provide busy school systems and substitute teachers with a concise, interesting, and accurate vehicle to assist in the training and development of substitute teachers. The topics and content were drawn from the author's 30-plus years of experience in a variety of educational roles, including substituting, teaching, and school administration, plus discussions with numerous substitute teachers in the field. It is meant to provide practical, proven ideas while drawing on the creative thoughts of the reader to make the strategies fit specific situations encountered as a substitute teacher. The major topics of need have been arranged into the following thematic chapters:

Chapter I

Obstacles the Substitute Teacher Must Overcome

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When you walk into a classroom, there are several factors that you have no control over, but if they are left unmanaged they will undermine your success. Learn the most common of these factors, how to identify their presence, and how to minimize the negative impacts they have on your day.

Chapter II

Connecting with the School Staff and Administration

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Located within a few feet of your classroom are the very resources that can mean the difference between your having a good or bad day. These resources are the professional colleagues and administrators of the school. This chapter highlights practical strategies and concepts reported by successful substitute teachers to connect with and elicit the help of these individuals.

Chapter III

Initial Impressions: Starting the Day

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People form their impressions of you and your effectiveness within the first few minutes of an interaction. Learn practical and proven methods to shape your initial contact with the students and use the goodwill developed to make the day a positive learning environment for all.

Chapter IV

Positive Classroom Management

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Classroom management is the number one problem substitute teachers face. A key for survival is achieving a balance between maintaining the normal classroom routine and the discipline level comfortable for the substitute teacher. The content of this chapter will help you manage the classroom in an effective and productive manner.

Chapter V

Curriculum Management

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Many times we are thrust into content we have not yet mastered. Learn how effective substitute teachers utilize a variety of resources to provide meaningful instruction in an area even when their content knowledge is not up to par. Then learn strategies to become more proficient with the academic content you are asked to teach.

Chapter VI

Active Learning

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Learn how to positively engage students through active learning strategies. Not only will these methods help students learn better, but they will also help with classroom management by making your instruction more fun and interesting.

Chapter VII

Practical Strategies to Build Your Reputation For Substituting and Teaching

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Much of the success of a substitute teacher is based on his or her reputation that has been built over time. Specific methods used by successful substitute teachers to develop a positive reputation with students, parents, and school staff are explored in this chapter.

Chapter VIII

Negotiating Your Personal Schedule and Substitute Placement Services

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Many times people choose substituting because they want control over their personal schedules. With increasing demands, however, it is easy for schedule balance to fall apart. Concrete and proven methods to effectively balance many demands are presented in this section.

Chapter IX

The Long-Term Substitute

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The position of a long-term substitute is different than that of a short-call substitute teacher. Learn how to be successful as a long-term substitute teacher. Among the topics discussed in this chapter are parent communication, curriculum integration, planning, and transitioning between the regular teacher and the substitute teacher.

How to Use This Book

This book is formatted to meet your needs as a substitute teacher. Since each chapter can stand alone, feel free to go through the book in any order you prefer. In the past, substitutes have found it helpful to start by concentrating on areas of need or major interest first, then examining the remaining chapters as the need arises. This helps to maximize your use of time and the positive impact of the book.

Since the pages are in a binder format, you can add helpful resources as you gather them. Just punch holes and insert them in the appropriate area. This will ensure that your book is able to grow and change as you do. By keeping your book current and up to date, you'll be able to get the maximum use out of it for years to come.

Finally, be sure to jot down on the pages any notes you think would be helpful. Take the book with you as you travel around substituting. It will provide ideas and inspiration when you need it. Remember, you set the tone for a positive substituting experience. Go into the job expecting good things to happen and they will. Enjoy the children you impact and the funny things they do. Without them, life would be exceptionally boring.

Good luck in your efforts. The future is in your hands.

Chapter 1

Obstacles the Substitute Teacher Must Overcome

Much of our success in a classroom is directly related to the skills we have and the actions we initiate. There are factors, though, that can work against us, even though we had nothing to do with their creation. This chapter identifies a sample of the more common of these factors working against substitutes, provides indicators to spot them in a classroom, and provides strategies for you to minimize their impact on your success. Once you have mastered these basics, you'll be able to diagnose a variety of school conditions that may get in your way as a substitute teacher. Then you can begin to influence these components and turn situations around to the positive.

Previous Impressions of Substitutes

Every school position carries with it certain stereotypes about the role. The position of substitute teacher is no exception. Because of the varied natures of those who substitute, there are many preconceived notions about substitute performance. Here are some of the more common previous impressions, key identifiers, and possible remedies to effectively deal with the situations.

Impression: Substitute teachers are like the second team—they are not as skilled as the regular staff.

For a number of years, some have looked at substitute teachers as those individuals who were unable to secure regular teaching jobs. They thought a major reason for this was the substitute's lack of teaching skills. For most, this was simply not true. With this view, people assumed they were getting less with a substitute. This lower set of expectations helped set the stage for a bad teaching day. Key indicators of this impression were lesson plans at a low level, statements made by staff and office workers, and student comments about an easy day coming up with a substitute.

Possible Remedies

The gap in substitute teacher skills compared to those needed today in schools has been broadened by the fact that most people have been

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disconnected from schools for an extended period of time. Whether it is due to being out of the workforce for a time or moving from location to location, it is difficult to stay connected. It is crucial for substitutes to stay current in the profession. Subscribe to and read major educational journals, take graduate courses, join and participate in teacher organizations, and talk to educators currently in schools. Staying current will enable you to understand and identify necessary teaching skills and focus on the major issues facing schools. Many districts sponsor educational clubs or organizations for their teachers to encourage discussion about issues such as whole language, science education, and other pertinent issues. Courses are offered at colleges, school sites, and the Internet that allow you to dialogue with other professionals. Participation in these and other professional growth experiences not only enhances your knowledge base, but shows your commitment to the profession.

As you begin to connect with schools or the class you are substituting in, be sure to briefly highlight your participation. For a school, this could take the form of an updated résumé. For a classroom it could be integrated subtly through examples. Do not take extensive time to talk about your participation as this could be seen as a turn-off. Be subtle but confident.

Impression: Substitutes lack the content knowledge needed to do a good job teaching in specific areas.

Many times we are called upon to teach in classes where we have limited knowledge. This not only causes a sense of personal uneasiness, but helps to undermine our success as professionals.

Possible Remedies

The most obvious remedy for the situation is to take a personal inventory of your content mastery, then identify areas of strength and needed growth. By substituting in these areas, you will ensure that you are working from your strengths. Invariably, however, you will be called to work outside your content strengths. In these situations it will be important that you have some understanding of the content in these classrooms. In anticipation of this situation, read popular magazines containing general information about these areas. There are also cable TV channels that may deal with these areas, such as

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history and science. Each content area also has a professional organization devoted to it. You could subscribe to their journal or visit their web site for information or links to other sources. These professional organizations usually do a good job of providing content information and analyzing the issues facing this segment of the profession. Consider spending time with a teacher who is skilled in your targeted area. This could consist of open discussion or spending time visiting his or her class. Be sure to ask for permission to visit a class and don't be disappointed if you are turned down at first. Even though most teachers are confident and open to visitors, there are still a few who may be reluctant at first. Over time you may be able to build the necessary rapport to secure a visit.

Ask the office or curricular department to loan you copies of student texts in the area of your need. They may not be able to accommodate your need immediately because of shortages or expense, but it is worth a try. An alternative might be securing an older or damaged copy. The core of the content area usually remains unchanged in new revisions, so most of the content will still be applicable. You may also need to consider renting or purchasing the text. City historical societies or science centers may be other sources of content information. Your local or college library may have content-specific books or be able to get them on interlibrary loan. All of these sources will provide you with the information you need to begin to understand a content area.

Impression: Substitutes are in and out; they don't care about the long-term success of the students or regular classroom connections.

Again, due to the random nature of substituting, it's easy to move from one experience to the next with out much connection. This impression can diminish the commitment of the staff and students to your success.

Possible Remedies

Up front, communicate in a sincere way your interest in helping the group you are working with. Statements like, "I'm happy to be working with you today" or "I've heard good things about this class" go a long way to build the personal rapport and commitment you need

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to impact these students. By showing commitment, you will win the students over. Another way to show commitment is to learn about the outside interests of the students. This can be done by reading recent copies of the school newsletter or the local paper. Most schools keep recent copies of both in the office or the library. If you go to a school on a regular basis, get to know the names of the school administrative assistant and other key people. This will provide you with another connection. Classroom teachers also feel the lack of connection with substitutes. Any personal connection you can make with them will be appreciated. If you can connect face-to-face that is great, but even personal notes will make a difference. Be sure to list easy ways to get in touch with you if they should have any questions after you have worked in their room. Be sure to correct any work you have generated during the day and leave the room as neat as you found it.

Other Factors That May Diminish the Success of Substitute Teachers

Short Notice

Substitute teachers are plagued by the short-notice nature of their jobs. The norm across the country seems to be an early-morning call for an assignment that day. This can cause problems because of necessary schedule changes, lack of preparation time, and difficulty in getting to the school on time.

Possible Remedies

The old Boy Scout motto, “Be prepared,” really applies here. Most effective substitutes have a variety of contingency plans in place to deal with last-minute calls. Another strategy used by some who don’t have last-minute flexibility is to establish “cut-off” times in deciding whether to take a position. If a call comes in after the cut-off, they share that they are already booked. You have to be careful using this idea, though, because schools quit calling substitutes who are booked all the time. Some substitute teachers will share that they would love to help out but have a major scheduling problem. Schools have been known to help a good substitute teacher solve a daycare or scheduling problem when they are honest about it. Some schools have allowed the substitute teacher’s children to attend district daycare to work out

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the problem. A planning sheet (Form 1.1) is included at the back of this guide to help with your scheduling.

Poor Plans/Preparation by the Teacher

A common problem faced by substitute teachers is the poor planning done for them by the regular teacher. Most teachers are conscientious and diligent in their planning for substitute teachers. Occasionally, we run into those that aren't. This not only gets you off to a bad start, but it makes you look unprepared and disorganized.

Possible Remedies

Initially, you need to have strategies in place to calm your nerves and get the day moving. Some substitute teachers take a proactive stance to avoid this problem. If they know in advance they will be working in a room, they ask the staff member who called them about the location of the plans. Others ask the building administrative assistant the same question upon check-in. Some schools require that substitute plans be filed in the office, but may forget to give them to you when you arrive. Advance contact with the teacher may also yield good results. If you've tried these options or been called in on very short notice, you can still engage the school administration or staff to help you locate the plans. They may have experienced this type of problem before and know where the plans are located. Be sure to look in any teacher's manuals that are located in the room. Teachers have been known to make notes or marks in them that may give you clues to where the class is in relation to the content. Asking students who arrive early may produce positive results. Usually, those who get to class early are the more focused, positive, and accurate students. If you are teaching in a situation where students exchange classes during the day, your first-period class may be able to provide important clues about the day. Teachers usually try to keep materials for multiple-period classes in relatively the same place, so knowing the plans for one period may give you the plan for the rest of the day.

Finally, many effective substitutes who work with a variety of grade levels carry a binder of possible activities with them. Some of these activities have been collected from previous substituting experience, while others are original activities based on the general themes or content emphasized at a particular grade level. For example,

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elementary classes are usually focused on the basic foundational concepts in math, language arts, and reading. Activities like these can be used:

Have students list six letters on their paper, each of them using a different combination of letters. Allow them ten minutes to find as many objects in the room that start with one of their letters as possible. The person with the most examples wins.

Divide the class into groups. Give each group ten simple story problems to solve. Once they are finished with their solutions, ask each group to write one story problem using objects in the room for the whole class to solve.

The class sits in a circle. Begin a story with a starter phrase and ask the student on your left to add the next sentence. Continue in this manner until students run out of ideas or everyone has contributed. Write the story down as it is generated as a reminder for the students. Then use the story throughout the day as a teaching tool for sentence structure, subject identification, etc. Vary the amount of guidance and prompting you give with the age of the students.

Students in intermediate or middle school focus on the more complex understanding and application of processes such as multi-step problem solving, sentence and paragraph structure, cause/effect relationships, reading for context, and so forth. Their skills are more developed and complex than those introduced in the elementary grades. The activities you use with these students should be multifaceted and involve complex thinking. Take advantage of the social nature of this age group by using activities like these:

Choose seven or eight articles that contain semi-complex issues from the local daily paper. Then divide the class into teams of three or four. Ask each team to read their article, then put together a short presentation highlighting what happened, what caused the event, and what needs to be done to solve the problem. This activity helps to build students' analytic and problem-solving skills.

Most mathematics textbooks contain brainteaser problems that the regular teacher may not use due to limited time. You

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can organize these problems on the board or give each group a different problem. Once the problems are solved, ask each group to explain the process they used. Then ask each group to generate a brainteaser of their own for the class to solve.

To start the day, list some sentences on the board that need corrections. Direct students to copy these sentences from the board, making the necessary corrections on their papers. Once these are corrected, have the students meet in groups to compare and discuss their corrections.

Finally, high school students are involved in very specific, specialized content. Generating multiple ideas to keep students of this age level productively occupied can be more challenging. Here are a couple of ideas to get you started:

As the students enter, give them a paper that has a grid similar to a large bingo board on it. In the squares are short phrases that ask the students to look for a classmate who matches the phrase. For example: find a person who has three brothers and sisters, find the person in the class who lives the farthest from the school building, or who drives the oldest car to school. When the students find someone who fits a category, they have him or her initial that square. After five minutes, find out who has filled the most squares. Have the class talk about the discovery process and what they learned from it.

Find a crossword puzzle in the local daily paper. Look over the puzzle in advance and be sure there is no inappropriate content. Enlarge the puzzle and hand it out to students to work on individually or in small groups. If a puzzle is especially hard, give some hints for its solution. There are also commercial puzzle books available that contain content-specific puzzles you might consider purchasing and carrying with you. When students have completed the puzzle, discuss any new terms or concepts they encountered.

These ideas are included as a starting point for creating your own activities to engage students when the regular teacher's plans are unavailable. Obviously, the best ideas are those you have tried and tested in the classroom. As you find ideas that work, be sure to save

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them and include them in your notebook or traveling bag that you take with you when you substitute.

Poor School Management

Most schools are well-managed places for students to learn in, but occasionally you will work in a school where classroom management and school-wide discipline are lacking. You can sense this type of environment almost as soon as you walk into one of these schools. There are also indicators such as a high noise level in public areas, paper and debris in the halls, graffiti inside the building, complaints by staff, and avoidance of responsibility for problems.

Possible Remedies

This is a situation that is out of your control. As a substitute teacher, you are just a guest in the school. In the short term, you will not be able to fix this problem. You need to quickly assess the situation relative to your personal comfort and safety. If it appears that you can't be successful or that you have been put in an unsafe situation, it is best for you not to return to the building in the future. If at all possible, try to stay through your present assignment. Walking out on a school in mid-day will always put you in a bad position, no matter what the circumstances. Many successful substitutes find a way to develop an information network about the potential problem schools. This way they can avoid them in the future. If you have total control over your teaching environment and can shape up the situation, you may want to consider taking on the challenge. This can be helpful to your reputation. Understand, though, that you are facing an uphill battle. For more information about classroom management, please see Chapter IV in this book.

Summary

In this chapter, we just scratch the surface of potential problems that face substitutes before they arrive at a school. Even though you have had nothing to do with their origin, they have the potential to negatively impact your day. Using your own observations, you will probably be able to identify even more problem areas. Keep in mind that you have the skills to turn these problems around and make a positive contribution to the children you serve in the classroom. Think of the ideas shared here as a starting point and build on them in the future.