

Enhance One Year of Education

By Max L. Longhurst

Substitute teachers are responsible for teaching over ONE FULL YEAR of every child's K-12 education! A recent national survey, conducted by the Substitute Teaching Institute at Utah State University, indicates that only 10% of school districts provide more than two hours of substitute teacher training. Additionally, this survey shows that 53% of districts provide NO TRAINING (Smith, Dorward & Jones, 1999). Thus, there is a tremendous need to implement effective training programs that will ultimately improve instruction leading to increased student achievement. Following an effective skills training, substitutes are more likely to accept assignments and provide better instruction in those assignments (Jones 1999).

With under half of all school districts sponsoring an orientation/training program for their substitute teachers, and 11% actually evaluating them, drastic improvements must be made in substitute skills training implementation (Purvis & Garvey, 1993 and Potter, 1995). Training must be instigated in the majority of the districts nationally. Replacement nurses would never be sent into a hospital without training, yet we continually send untrained instructors into our children's classrooms. It is apparent that improvements are needed in the realm of training for substitute teachers; however, many districts will respond with comments like, "We can't even get enough substitutes to cover empty classes, let alone take more time to train them." Interestingly though, training has been shown to be a key component to the increase in sub pool numbers (Minthorn, 1999). Geoffrey G. Smith, executive director of the Substitute Teaching Institute at Utah State University (STI/USU), states that "No other small investment in education today will make a more significant improvement in the classroom than training substitute teachers" (Smith, 1999).

If you were to ask students walking home from school what they did during the day, 10% would respond with "Oh, Nothing, we had a sub" (Staffing Industry, 1999). Students are presently not being effectively educated by a majority of substitute teachers, due to inadequate training. Permanent teachers frequently come to school even if they are ill because they have little trust in what will happen during a school day if a substitute is employed. Administrators are more concerned with what problems arise when substitutes are in a classroom than the quality of instruction that occurs. Educators exhibit this attitude with comments like: "It's just one wasted day,"

or “Let me know if Henry acts up.” Without question, substitute teacher training is an overlooked concern within school systems; however, it is one issue that, if improved, can have tremendous impact on ONE FULL YEAR of every student’s education.

New ideas are always on the horizon in education. Although these new programs provide viable assistance in educating students, it is also imperative to perfect our current components. Substitute teachers are currently in 274,000 of our nation’s classrooms each day, based on a 10% absenteeism rate (National Center for Education Statistics, 1999; Staffing Industry, 1999). Because of this, skills training for substitutes will powerfully impact student learning. With sound classroom management skills, basic knowledge of legal and first aid issues, implementation ability with specific teaching strategies, and a resource kit containing lesson plans, fill-in activities, and other essential resources, substitute teachers have the foundation to foster a productive classroom environment. Permanent teachers will gain confidence that substitute teachers have the ability to instruct; administrators and staff will respect them as educators; and students will begin to say, “Our substitute was great. He/she taught me how to....”

Since improved training opportunities are needed, what does effective substitute teacher skill training look like? Allocated time, curriculum content, follow up, and the involved individuals are essential items to address when creating, overhauling, or simply augmenting a substitute training process. As districts begin to implement training sessions for substitute teachers, it is imperative that the material being used has been proven to be effective.

STI/USU has developed training material based on sound educational content and validated through a Department of Education research grant called STEP-IN (Substitute Teacher Educational Programs Initiative). Based on this research, the following content components have been shown to be vital in a substitute teacher training program:

1. Being Prepared and Professional
2. Classroom Management Skills
3. Legal and First Aid Issues
4. Teaching and Instructional Strategies.
5. The Use of Fill-In Activities
6. Creation of a SubPack or Resource Kit

These six components of training effectively prepare substitute teachers to enter a classroom. STI/USU recommends that, at a minimum, training should be conducted in a three to four-day session. The actual time spent in instructor directed training should be a two-day, or twelve-hour, workshop with an additional two days allocated for observation, shadowing, or mentoring. As all educators

know, actual class time is essential to understanding how to instruct appropriately. STI/USU further recommends in-service opportunities throughout the school year in order to increase the professional ability of substitute teachers.

Being Prepared and Professional

Many substitute teachers are limited in knowledge regarding school atmosphere and environment. Having not been in a classroom since they were in school as a student creates a disadvantage for many substitute teachers. Due to this, it is necessary for substitute teacher instruction to detail ways an educator should dress, act, and prepare for a school day. Dressing professionally and arriving early to the assignment are just two items that should be discussed. Being a professional substitute teacher is an all-day job which can be organized for training into the following five categories:

- At Home
- Prior to Entering the Classroom
- In the Classroom Before School
- Throughout the Day
- At the End of the Day

Principals, teachers, and students have high expectations for instructors entering their classrooms. It is critical to provide training for substitute teachers so they can meet or exceed the expectations of the educational community.

Classroom Management Skills

The number one skill requested by substitute teachers is the ability to effectively manage a classroom (Smith, Murdock, Jones, Goldenhersh, & Latham, 1999). One essential key to managing a class successfully is learning how to handle situations without becoming emotionally involved. The first part of instruction should provide information about basic principles of why students behave the way they do and practical steps to implement that encourage desired behaviors. According to Dr. Glenn Latham, a professor emeritus of Special Education at Utah State University, in addition to basic principles of behavior there are five management skills proven to prevent and/or extinguish 94% of inappropriate student behaviors.

Teach Expectations

The first skill that substitute teachers should learn is how to teach expectations. Before students can be expected to behave appropriately, instructors must explain the specific behavior they expect. Substitute teachers must learn how to clearly and specifically state their expectations.

Get and Keep Students On-Task

Substitute teachers must know and understand that “On-Task”

means that students are actively engaged in appropriate learning activities. Beginning instruction by involving the whole class in a student self-guided or a teacher-directed activity, involving the whole class, will start the day with task-oriented behavior.

Positive Teacher to Pupil Interaction

On average, teachers allow about 98% of all appropriate behaviors to go unrecognized and are more likely to recognize inappropriate behavior than they are to recognize appropriate behavior (Smith, et. al., 1999). Every educator can learn ways to increase the amount of positive interactions. These positive interactions dramatically increase the rate of appropriate student behavior.

Respond Non-Coercively

Some student behaviors are inappropriate and must be addressed. Substitute teachers need to know ways to instructively deal with these types of behavior. The following are six steps an educator can follow to stop and re-direct inappropriate behavior:

- Say something positive.
- Briefly describe the problem behavior.
- Describe the desired behavior.
- Give a reason why the new behavior is more desirable.
- Practice the desired behavior.
- Provide positive feedback.

Avoid Being Trapped

The use of a trap-related management technique is evidence of a frantic, desperate, even drastic attempt to maintain control of the classroom environment. Yelling and making unnecessary threats, for example, are ineffective when trying to manage the classroom. All educators should understand the seven trap-related control methods, and implement proactive strategies that avert these traps and maintain productive learning.

Gaining skill in a variety of effective classroom management techniques will allow substitute teachers to implement the most effective strategy for any given situation. Once classroom management concerns are addressed, focus can be placed on student achievement and instructional continuity.

Legal and First Aid Issues

Substitute teachers are held to the same legal liability as permanent teachers and should therefore have knowledge of policies and legal requirements of working within school systems. Policies such as first aid issues, emergency/accident procedures, and field trip requirements, should be included in all training programs. Legal aspects such as: release and supervision of children; due care and caution; and confidentiality are also imperative to include in substitute training. With specific content instruction, substitute

teacher concerns and the improper handling of legally sensitive situations can be dramatically decreased.

Teaching and Instruction Strategies

Knowledge of several teaching strategies enables substitute teachers to equip themselves with the ability to instruct students at a variety of levels. The use of a KWL strategy is common among many educators. KWL stands for “What do I know”, “What do I want to know”, and “What have I learned”. With this one teaching technique substitute teachers can implement an introduction, review, or extension of learning in any classroom. Other common teaching strategies include: brainstorming; concept mapping; higher level thinking; and how to present audiovisual materials. Each additional technique a substitute teacher learns provides them with another tool to adapt instructional delivery to each situation and learner.

The Use of Fill-in Activities

What should substitute teachers do when lesson plans are sketchy, incomplete, fail to fill the class period, or are completely missing? With appropriate fill-in activities, substitute can provide meaningful instruction and supplement the permanent teacher’s lesson plan when necessary. Having a few activity ideas in mind will enable the substitute teacher to keep the teaching and learning moving throughout the day. There are three basic types of activities that students can engage in that will assist in maintaining positive learning.

- **5 Minute Fillers**

These are short engaging activities designed to keep the whole class attentive and involved during those last few minutes before lunch or to get the class refocused after a break.

- **Early Finishers**

There will always be several students who finish assignments early. Early finishers provide activities for students to be involved in exciting learning activities. They also provide great motivation for students to work hard throughout the day.

- **Short Activities**

These are activities involving the whole class and are directed by the teacher. These activities should take twenty minutes to one hour to complete and will provide a learning environment when lessons finish extremely early.

Substitute teachers need to receive instruction on ways to implement activities each of these three categories.

Creation of a SubPack or Resource Kit

Substitute teachers need to know which activities and materials can be used to supplement the lesson plans of the permanent teacher

at a moment's notice. Being prepared for substitute teaching begins with having an activity bag of ideas and lessons that can be implemented when a learning activity ends early or lesson plans are sketchy (Dubois, Gangel, Young, Heiss, Webb, & Paprocki, 1991). Not knowing the content or possibly the grade level can be detrimental to preparation for substitute teachers. Substitute teachers, therefore, need to be taught specific types of activities and materials that can be used across many grade levels and content areas. The creation of a SubPack, or resource kit is a must for every substitute teacher. The four basic categories a resource kit should contain are: everyday items, rewards, activity materials, and personal/professional items.

Everyday Items

Everyday components of a SubPack are things such as scissors, glue sticks, crayons, calculator, and materials for nametags. These items enable substitute teachers to have needed supplies at a moment's notice versus rifling through every drawer and cupboard in the classroom.

Rewards & Motivators

Many times students will behave better or work more diligently if there is an external motivation. Certificates, tickets, stickers, or privilege cards are effective rewards that entice students to remain on-task and learning.

Activity Materials

A guessing jar is a good example of an activity that a substitute teacher can bring into any grade level and implement as an extension activity. Picture books, tangrams, brainteasers or a variety of other lesson activities are great resources that encourage involvement and learning.

Personal/Professional Items

These are parts of a SubPack that help substitute teachers take care of their needs during the day. Snacks, a water bottle, change for lunch, a clipboard, and a change of shoes can help keep a substitute's personal needs satisfied.

The instructors of substitute teacher training programs can be from a variety of sources. The recommended trainers, however, are administrators, master teachers, principals, and master substitute teachers. An administrator or principal should present legal issues and policy guidelines. A principal is also helpful in providing insight to the expectations when substitutes arrive at a school. Master teachers are excellent instructors with regard to teaching strategies, classroom management, and fill-in activities. Veteran substitute teachers provide realistic examples and explanations that participants can identify with and relate to.

In addition to training substitute teachers, many districts have

improved their substitute teacher programs with training designed for the district and site administration. William R. Drury suggests eight ways to make a more effective substitute teacher program. He indicates that greeting substitutes at a special meeting prior to school starting improves the professionalism that is given to and expected from substitute teachers (Drury, 1988). All the players in the educational system must become more aware and appreciative of the vital role substitute teachers play in teaching students.

Does skills training for substitute teachers improve factors leading to student achievement such as on-task-behavior, interest level, and continuity of instruction? The answer to this question is a resounding YES! Training substitute teachers improves the ability of substitutes to enhance the learning environment of every classroom they enter. Prior to training many substitute teachers find themselves “winging it.” After training, substitute teachers possess specific skills that can be implemented to improve every classroom situation. Students need educators that have skills that aid instruction. Through implementation of a proven substitute teacher skills training, school districts across the nation can effectively meet this need.

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