

# Handyman Training for Substitutes: How Districts Can Prepare Substitute Teachers

*By Max L. Longhurst*

A disconcerting amount of substitute teachers enter our nation's classrooms with little or no training in the skill of teaching. An alarming 87% of school districts nationally provide no skill or classroom management training for their substitute teachers. Further inquiry shows that of the districts that do provide skill training a minimal 6.6% spend more than 2 hours training substitute teachers in the craft of instruction (Dorward, Jones, Smith, 1999). Substitute teachers are continually asked to arrive with the ability to perform a variety of assignments with little or no training. Similar to the substitute, every handyman arrives at the job site not knowing the tools, skills, and materials that will be required, but possesses a basic understanding of construction. Supervisors of substitute teachers must implement every measure to enhance or create a training program for substitutes that addresses basic instructional strategies to justly meet the needs of both students and substitutes.

Prior to arrival at a home the handyman has honed his/her skills through an apprenticeship or trade school experience. Substitute teachers should similarly be prepared with teaching skills, management techniques, and educational resource material. This article provides a paralleled explanation of the training needs of substitute teachers and handymen with an introduction to necessary skill training and a discussion of effective delivery methods.

## **Professionalism and Prior Preparation**

A handyman's success is dependent on his professional manner and preparation. Substitute teachers are similar in their need for preparation prior to the school day. The Substitute Teaching Institute indicates that preparation and professionalism of a substitute teacher can be divided into five basic areas (Smith et al., 2000).

1. **At home** substitute teachers can prepare for an assignment by dressing professionally, having a note pad and pencil by the telephone for incoming calls, assembling a Super SubPack of ideas and materials for immediate use throughout the day, and leaving early enough to arrive at the school on time.
2. **Prior to entering the classroom** substitute teachers can ask appropriate questions at the office, introduce themselves to faculty and staff, and locate important places such as the teacher's lounge, cafeteria, and restrooms.

3. **Before greeting the students** at the door substitute teachers can read the permanent teacher's lesson plans, write their names on the board, find the necessary supplies for the day, and provide a starter activity that will engage the students immediately as they enter the classroom.
4. **Throughout the day** the substitute teachers should remain calm and collected, be fair with rewards and consequences, and be positive and respectful.
5. **Before leaving for the day** substitute teachers should account for items in the classroom, leave a report of the day, lock up the classroom, and check out at the office.

### **Management Techniques**

Every handyman has a basic understanding of the principles of construction and building, allowing him/her to meet daily challenges. Prior to completing any work an expectational agreement often sets both the homeowner and the worker up for success. Handymen also take great care to manage tools effectively in order to make efficient use of their time at a job site. Attributes of clear expectations, positive interaction, awareness of possible concerns, and tool management are similar to the training needs of a substitute teacher.

Every individual that works in education should have an understanding of the principles of human behavior. With this knowledge many common management concerns can be avoided. All educators recognize the classroom management as critical. The number one skill requested by substitute teachers is the ability to effectively manage a classroom (Smith et al., 2000). Substitute teacher training should therefore focus on the following five skills of behavior management to be instructionally effective:

- Skill #1: The ability to teach expectations.
- Skill #2: The ability to get and keep students on-task.
- Skill #3: The ability to maintain a high rate of positive teacher to pupil interactions and risk free student response opportunities.
- Skill #4: The ability to respond noncoercively.
- Skill #5: The ability to avoid being trapped.

An amazing 94% of all inappropriate student behaviors can be avoided when educators appropriately implement these five skills (Latham, 1992).

### **Skill #1: The Ability to Teach Expectations**

Teaching expectations involves communicating to students the behaviors that are expected throughout the day. Setting expectations, similar to a handyman's signed contract, creates a learning environment framework that enables everyone in the classroom to exhibit appropriate behaviors. During every teaching experience substitute teachers should set and maintain classroom, instructional, and procedural expectations.

This can be done at the beginning of the day and continue throughout each period or lesson transition. Classroom expectations should be concise, specific, instructive, operational, and must convey the behavioral expectation. Substitute teachers should adhere to the permanent teachers' stated expectations whenever possible. This provides the student with a consistent learning environment.

All educators should be aware of three critical components that students should be given in order to successfully meet any expectations.

1. Students should know exactly what they are to do.
2. The method of completion must be clearly stated to all the students.
3. The instructor must make sure that the necessary tools are available to complete the task.

It is essential to teach substitute teachers the skills to effectively set achievable expectations.

### **Skill #2: The Ability to Get and Keep Students On-Task**

All educators must learn to recognize on-task behavior where students are actively and appropriately engaged in learning. Getting and keeping students on-task can usually be achieved by using two basic strategies. First, beginning instruction and activities immediately and, second, monitoring student actions by walking around the room. Additional strategies that could be included in substitute teacher training are the "whisper technique," "write and erase," or "captivate and redirect." Implementing effective strategies to get students on-task allows substitute teachers to spend less time getting students redirected from inappropriate activities and more time providing instruction.

### **Skill #3: The Ability to Maintain a High Rate of Positive Teacher-to-Pupil Interactions**

Strengthening desirable behavior through positive reinforcement does more to make a classroom conducive to learning than any other single skill (Latham, 1992). It is imperative that substitute teachers become well accustomed to providing a positive environment. The purpose of training substitute teachers is to prepare them in positive proactive skills. With these skills the substitute teacher will appropriately meet the needs of all students.

### **Skill #4: The Ability to Respond Non-Coercively**

Inappropriate student behaviors are classified as consequential or inconsequential. Actions that destroy the learning environment are consequential and must be stopped and redirected appropriately. To do this, substitute teachers must be equipped with the skills to redirect student behavior appropriately. Behavior that is aggravating yet inconsequential requires the instructor to identify and then dismiss the behavior or attend to it. Most inappropriate behavior is inconsequential in nature and, if given time, will extinguish itself.

**Skill #5: The Ability to Avoid Being Trapped**

All educators should understand seven trap-related control methods that adversely influence the classroom environment. Proactive implementation strategies can help substitute teachers avoid becoming trapped by student behavior. The seven traps that educators often find themselves in are:

1. The Criticism Trap.
2. The Common Sense Trap.
3. The Questioning Trap.
4. The Sarcasm Trap.
5. The Despair and Pleading Trap.
6. The Threat Trap.
7. The Physical and Verbal Force Trap.

Recognizing traps and how to avoid them will allow substitute teachers to focus on instruction over behavior management.

**Legal Issues**

Handymen need to know and/or learn basic safety procedures and legal codes. Likewise a substitute teacher should be knowledgeable in the legal issues that govern the school system. It is critical for a substitute teacher to know the policies and procedures of the school system where he/she works. Legally, a substitute teacher carries the same liability as the permanent teacher.

Even though approximately one-third of the states require substitute teachers to be approved by the state, all substitute teachers benefit from learning the legal ramifications for action or inaction as they work with children. Legal aspects are imperative components of any substitute teacher training and should include the following items (Rosborough, Sherbine, Miller, 1993):

- release and supervision of children.
- due care and caution.
- confidentiality.
- safe schools.
- blood-borne pathogens.
- harassment.
- child abuse reporting.
- first aid guidelines.

Training for substitutes regarding the legal aspects of teaching protects children, substitute teachers, and the school district.

**Technique Implementation**

As a handyman begins a job, he/she is aware of his personal skills and the tools he has available in his tool belt. Knowledge of various tools does little if the user can not completely implement the tool to complete a job. However, there are times when standard methods will not work. In this case adaptive techniques must be employed to

complete the task. The most valuable skill of a handyman is his/her ability to adapt to various situations and recognize effective ways to solve a homeowner's concerns.

Likewise, every substitute teacher should possess teaching strategies that he/she can implement. In order to enter classrooms and effectively teach a substitute teacher needs to be able to implement a teaching strategy that is effective and appropriate. Similar to the handyman the substitute teacher must select the best tool from a variety of teaching techniques. Basic teaching strategy tools should begin with:

1. Concept mapping.
2. Brainstorming.
3. KWL.
4. Cooperative learning.
5. Questioning strategies.
6. Implementing audiovisual materials.

Knowing the tool is important, knowing how and when to use the teaching strategy tools is crucial. Every substitute teacher should receive training equipping them with the tools and knowledge to provide appropriate instruction that engages students' minds and elicits their best efforts. As with the handyman, the substitute teacher must possess the right tools for the job and the ability to use those tools adaptively in any situation.

### **Quick Remedies**

Duct tape is used for thousands of alternative needs beyond repairing or connecting ductwork. Duct tape or adhesive glue are only quick-fix items of a prepared handyman. These short-term fixes allow permanent solutions to be made based on the situation. Similar to temporarily fixing a leak, substitute teachers need to have a personal supply of quick-fix items that keep instruction moving until the students can be engaged in the next learning activity.

A substitute teacher's quick-fix items are referred to as filler activities. These activities include:

1. 5-minute fillers.
2. Early finishers.
3. Short activities.

Substitute teachers who know three or four activities in each of these areas are capable of creating continuous learning throughout the school day. Behavior concerns are minimized when substitute teachers can keep the learning moving throughout the day by maintaining a physical and cognitive set of filler activities.

### **Supplies and Materials**

One of the most valuable assets of a handyman is a toolbox. The toolbox in many cases may be an entire truck or van, nevertheless the supplies and materials that the handyman brings to your home will

determine his/her productivity. Although specialized tools abound in the handyman's vehicle, very few will be used at every job. However, there are tools that he has with him at all times; these general-use tools enable him/her to complete a job effectively while spending less time searching for a specialized wrench. A substitute teacher should also have a set of supplies and ideas that can be brought to the school allowing him/her to be prepared for most situations.

A SubPack is a resource kit, toolbox, or emergency preparedness kit that substitute teachers use to adapt to various classroom situations. Like the handyman, the substitute teacher may have specialized items. Along with specific things, every substitute teacher should have generic materials and activities that work for most grades and content areas. SubPack items are included in one of the following four categories:

1. Classroom supplies.
2. Rewards and motivators.
3. Personal and professional items.
4. Activity materials.

Pens and pencils, rubber gloves and Band-Aids, stickers and motivators, or file folders are all examples of specific items included in a SubPack. Keep in mind that the goal of creating a SubPack is to have essential items to make instruction easier.

### **Implementation of Training**

The comparison of the substitute teacher and the handyman shows that training in a number of educational skills is essential for the effectiveness of a substitute teacher. However, questions still remain, such as: "Who will provide the training?" and "How should a district implement a training program?" The implementation of the ideal training program is often difficult to achieve if both of these questions are not answered adequately.

### **Who**

Every employee needs to know what to do, how to do it, and have the tools necessary to complete the assignment. A key question is who should provide these needed capsules of knowledge? Every district has two groups that must collaborate to effectively train substitute teachers. First, the Human Resources or Personnel Department has the concern of hiring enough qualified substitute teachers. The second group, Staff Development, is charged with training district employees. When these two groups combine efforts to provide basic orientation needs and practical skills training, the quality and quantity of substitute teachers improve. It is also necessary to involve a number of other individuals in the training provided to a substitute teacher. Site principals, faculty, and staff of school sites, as well as members of the district administration, should all be involved in the training program of substitute teachers.

The value of viewing substitute teachers as important components in the educational puzzle is magnified when we understand that these educators will teach every child for over one full year from kindergarten to graduation. Principals can positively influence the training of substitute teachers by providing a site view of expectations. When a teacher works with students, it is important to provide behavioral expectations. It is additionally critical to provide expectations to substitute teachers in order to achieve educational objectives. School staff and faculty should also provide input to the expectations provided to the substitute teachers in order to reduce miscommunication. In short, all the individuals that have direct or indirect relationships with the substitute teacher should give input to the training of substitute teachers.

## **How**

Inventiveness can be a great tool when looking for funding to implement substitute teacher training. Initially, one should understand that most training of substitute teachers requires approximately the same amount as the pay for one day of substitute teaching. Funding can come directly from the school district budget for staff development or directly from substitute teachers. Using combinations of various funding opportunities will allow districts to achieve substitute training goals. The following are examples of possible funding sources:

1. Substitute pay with graduated reimbursement for days taught in the school system.
2. Levels of compensation based on training attendance.
3. District funding.
4. Regional Education Service Agency (RESA), County Office of Education (COE), or other Local Education Agencies (LEA).
5. Business partnerships.
6. Grant opportunities such as Goals 2000.

It is key to remember that the training of substitute teachers must provide active engagement in the practice of skills. Instead of telling a substitute teacher how to handle a difficult student, it is best to have him/her role-play and practice an appropriate response to a student demonstrating a belligerent attitude. This enables the substitute teacher to remember the skill and how to implement it.

Substitute teacher training can occur in a single day, multiple-evening sessions, or on a weekly basis for several sessions. It is recommended that substitute teachers receive a minimum of 10 hours of instruction prior to entering the classroom. Actual observation and practice of teaching strategies with students is a tremendous benefit to novice educators. The following ideas for training options have been useful for districts across the United States.

1. One full week of training including 2 days of classroom observation.

2. Full day training on a teacher preparation or workday.
3. Two or three evening session each week allowing the substitute teacher to implement skills throughout the week.
4. Beginning of the year training when demand for substitute teachers is low.
5. Mid-year training for specific classroom management or teaching strategy implementation.
6. Summer training used as a recruiting tool for the upcoming school year.

### **Conclusion:**

Every educational organization that elicits help from substitute teachers should train substitute teachers to be productive and proficient in the classroom. As with the handyman, the substitute teacher can not wait until the original builder, or permanent teacher, returns to provide educational instruction. The substitute teacher must be prepared to provide appropriate learning activities that meet the educational needs of students. A substitute teacher is in effect expected to be prepared and professional, proficient in multiple management techniques, cognizant of numerous legal issues, constantly adaptable to every classroom lesson plan, and able to maintain a ready supply of needed classroom materials. Providing effective training for substitute teachers fulfills the desperate need to send substitute teachers into schools with applicable knowledge and tools to successfully maintain the learning environment.

*Max L. Longhurst is managing editor of the SubJournal and staff development specialist at the Substitute Teaching Institute at Utah State University. His roles at the Institute include the development, dissemination, and field-testing of educational materials to enhance, develop, field test, and disseminate materials that benefit substitute teachers in our nation's schools.*

### **References**

- Dorward, J. T., Jones, K. R., & Smith, G. G. (1999). [National stratified random sample survey of 1500 school districts concerning substitute teaching]. Unpublished raw data.
- Latham G. I. (1992). Managing the classroom environment. Logan, UT: P&T Ink.
- Rosborough, M., Sherbine, D., Miller, D. (1993). Recruiting, selecting, and training substitute teachers. NASSP Bulletin, 106-107.
- Smith, G. G., Murdock, C., Longhurst, M. L., Goldenhersh, B., & Latham, G. I. (2000). Substitute Teacher Handbook (5<sup>th</sup> ed.). Logan, UT: Utah State University.