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Introduction

Wondering Why to Sub? Rewards of Substitute Teaching

This is the true joy in life, the being used for a purpose recognized by yourself as a mighty one.

George Bernard Shaw
(Lincoln & Suid, 1986, p. 60)

Substitute teachers—subs—are a special breed. Called in, often on a moment's notice, they teach students they may never have worked with, until that day. Then, the next day, they tackle another group, at another grade level, at another school. Subs constantly shift their attention and activities to bring quality teaching to a changing population of students.

Despite its transient manner and frequent shifts of focus, there are rewards to be had for subbing.

1. Substituting allows for a flexible schedule. If a person chooses not to sub on a particular day, that's okay.
2. Subbing invites a person to "get a foot in the door." School districts and principals have the opportunity to see the sub in action. That first-hand view can make the difference when a position opens in the building.

Substituting allows for a flexible schedule.

3. While subbing, a person gains valuable experience that can be used in future subbing dates or a future fulltime classroom position. Subs have an advantage over many teachers, because they see so many students in so many classrooms and so many settings. Some subs even have teaching experiences from kindergarten to grade 12 before they leave the sub life. What a valuable vantage point.
4. Subbing allows people to practice their learned skills until such time as a teaching job opens for them. Many people graduate from college with teaching certificates but are unable to gain fulltime employment in the classroom. Newly certified people can get an edge on others by making themselves available to sub.

But, not everyone is a candidate for the monumental tasks associated with the job of being a substitute teacher. Are you? As you read the book, reflect on the issues brought out by examining the life of a sub, and decide if it's something you might want to do.



Chapter 1

Qualifying to Sub: The Right Stuff

*First say to yourself what you would be;
and then do what you have to do.*

Epictetus
(Lincoln & Suid, 1986, p. 57)

Not everyone can be a substitute teacher. Most schools require a certain set of qualifications to be approved for sub duty. As Manera (1996) wrote, substitutes need "teaching skills, professional attributes, and personal characteristics..." (p. 2). Effective teaching requires the substitute to know and be able to impart the content of the lesson in such a way that students will be able to learn and remember. To accomplish that monumental task, the substitute needs to present him- or herself as a competent, organized, professional adult. While filling the role of a sub, a person must demonstrate the highest standards of morality and legality. As this book describes, these are cornerstone qualities to a positive subbing experience.

In addition to these core qualities, to be successful, subs need management techniques, an ability to work with students, and knowledge of the subject matter. That isn't to say that a substitute must have the same level of content knowledge as the teacher, however,

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because substitutes may be in five different classes in any given week, it's often best if they have a wide range of content knowledge. Yet, having at least some background knowledge in the content area sends an immediate message to the students of the sub's competence.

Substitutes are in short supply and high demand.

In addition to having content knowledge and student management techniques, a substitute must also behave professionally. When in a teacher's classroom, the substitute becomes the teacher for the day and must act in professional ways. They must preserve information confidentiality, interact honorably and tactfully with other staff and parents, dress suitably, and comport themselves with integrity and decorum. Although substitutes are in short supply and high demand, districts insist that their substitutes be adults who can positively influence their students.

Substitutes need a storehouse of energy to meet the demands of each new classroom. Even as their proficiency is being tested, they have opportunities to hone their skills—both high-energy undertakings that call on interpersonal traits, such as initiative, flexibility, and adaptability, key characteristics of successful substitutes.

Yet, one barrier to successful substituting is the stereotypical misperception of subs as merely babysitters. Many teachers have busy work to be completed in their absence, and students view that absence as a "free day." Most parents want certified teachers in front of the classroom and feel subs don't stack up in this respect. The easiest way to combat this misperception is to actively build rapport with faculty, students, administration, and community members.



One good way to build that rapport is to be visible in the community—shop in the local grocery, gas up at the nearby gas station, and order pizza from the pizza parlor across from the school. Become a familiar face with a smile. When the misperception is disproved, the barrier easily dissolves. Then, enhance the positive perception by maintaining a positive reputation as a caring adult. Get involved in community activities, make connections with teacher leaders, read the local newspaper for positive news about students and their families, and yes, attend a soccer game or a dance recital or two. Be visible, become involved, demonstrate interest—and stereotypes disappear.



Chapter 2

Choosing a Career: Life as a Professional Sub

Every calling is great when greatly pursued.

Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr.
(Lincoln & Suid, 1986, p. 14)

Substitute teachers provide an essential service for school districts. However, being a substitute teacher is a difficult role to fill. On the one hand, subbing can provide an incredible amount of experience; on the other hand, it is not like having one's own classroom. Classroom teachers develop connections with the same students in day-after-day interactions; subs develop connections with different students in one day of interaction. Still, some people like the diversity that subbing provides. They choose to make subbing a temporary or permanent career. That's great, because school districts always need quality substitutes.

Each school district has its own set of procedures and criteria for qualifying substitute teachers. For example, many schools require their subs to have a college degree, although some do not. Because student safety is paramount, many states require fingerprinting checks of all employees who work with students. This includes custodians, teachers, cafeteria workers, aides and assistants, coaches, and yes, substitutes. Don't be alarmed if asked to go to be fingerprinted.



Each school district also has its own application process. Usually, a person needs to visit the district office to obtain an application. The application requires background information and a list of references. After completing the application, the potential sub delivers the papers to the district office or personnel director. After a check on references, each potential sub must be officially approved by the Board of Education before being added to the sub list. After this vetting process has been completed, the approved sub is added to the approved substitutes' call list.

And, of course, each school district has its own pay policy. Usually, per diem substitutes do not receive benefit packages from the school. Health insurance, dental, sick days, and so forth, which are part and parcel of a teacher's contract, are generally not provided for day-to-day subs, but may be provided to a full-time or long-term sub. Subs usually do not receive tenure appointments.

After being added to the sub list, the sub sits back and waits for a call from the school. The person who arranges the substitute requests may be a secretary, a principal, an assistant, or a person hired specifically for that purpose.

Subs receive three basic kinds of calls: pre-planned, early morning, and emergency. If the subbing date has been pre-planned, it is always a good idea to call a couple of days ahead to confirm. Sometimes, workshops are cancelled or appointments change, and the sub request is no longer needed. Checking ahead of the scheduled day saves some confusion.



The early morning call allows the sub to accept or decline the offer. If the sub chooses to decline the offer, it is considerate to provide a reason, but not necessary. However, people who make arrangements with subs appreciate knowing why a sub declines a specific call, so they can adjust their calls accordingly.

Sometimes, teachers require subs in the middle of the day for emergency reasons. These are the most difficult for a school to fill. As a career sub, a person may already be booked for the day. Those who did not receive a call early in the morning may receive a call later in the day. This is why subs are seen as pinch hitters. They may be called in at any time.

For organizational purposes, it is wise to use an appointment book to log all sub requests. Little slips of paper by the phone can be dangerous, given their tendency to lose themselves under other pieces of paper. A good day planner is a safe bet, but if you are a paperless planner, be sure to carry your Palm Pilot with you to your subbing experiences and keep it close to the phone for pre-planned days. Be sure to record facts about each sub request: date of request, school, date or dates needed, class, contact at school, and special requests or instructions that are made.

