

Growing the Showcase Garden

By Chris Mikesell

Plant seeds in fertile soil, water, feed, and weed them on a routine basis. A beautiful garden requires a plan, time, attention, commitment and energy – the benefits are reaped year after year.

The Garden

Taking care of substitute teaching in a district is in many ways similar to taking care of a beautiful garden. It is easy to see how the elements of a garden like the soil and the plants can compare with the district environment and the substitute teachers themselves. To achieve success, both gardens must be cared for with diligence and knowledge. The focus of this article is to examine the similarities between the garden and the substitute system. It should provide food for thought.

Start with fertile soil:

If substitute teachers are the plants in the garden, the new substitute is simply a seed. Right now, across the nation, school districts enjoy the benefits of numerous applicants in the substitute pool; many have turned to the field of education as a new career choice. With the economic downturn districts are not lacking human resources for substitute work in the classroom. There is, in other words, a bounty of seeds at the moment.

The first and most critical step for a good substitute program is to prepare the soil, or the school. Schools should be trained in how to treat substitute teachers so they can effectively use this powerful resource. As a district administrator, you should help the schools identify ways to care for the substitutes assigned to them. Also, you should examine your own administrative processes to see if they help substitutes be successful or if they make it difficult for them.

When planting seeds or transplants, a hole is dug and water and plant food are added to it prior to inserting the plant. Just as poorly planted seeds having no water fail to thrive, substitutes hired without training will be ineffective, frustrated, and will either quit or be fired. Tell candidates what is expected of them in the classroom and at the school site. Give them realistic as well as specific expectations. Provide directions for check-in/check-out procedures and

descriptions of site-specific routines and extra duties. Be sure to keep substitute training simple by using the “tried and true” methods. The USU *Substitute Teacher Handbook* references such tools as proximity and hand signals. Fred Jones, in *Tools for Teaching*, and Michael Grinder, in *Envoy*, offer additional suggestions. Substitute teachers want to be nourished with professional development experiences.

As the Garden Grows

Irrigation:

Everything that grows must have water. During cooler weather plants need less water, but during the dryer, warmer months scheduled watering is required. At times, schools absences seem to *flow* on a more even, balanced momentum, and substitutes are self-sufficient. During other times, when there is more school stress, substitutes require more attention. For example, the beginning and ending of grading cycles or semesters, major holidays, and annual school events such as homecoming and prom, add stress to the general school environment, and result in the need for encouragement and appreciation. At these times, adjust the watering schedule. This is the time to send out the newsletter recognizing the success of substitutes, shares tips for success, and remind substitutes to visit school libraries and bookstores for additional resources for the classroom and their tool kits. Keep information on the district or substitute website current; change tips every week to encourage substitutes to visit the site. This costs nothing but time, and little time at that. Remember when as a teacher you called parents complimenting them on how well their child did that day in school? It works for substitutes, too. Make random phone calls to substitutes. Ask for feedback on their jobs and encourage and compliment them. Send out postcards that recognize their commitment and effort. Encourage substitutes to network with one another—especially at orientations, trainings, and at school sites. Remember that it is the social aspects of work that support commitment and retention of employees. Substitutes have to feel connected. Like plants, if they are not watered, they will not grow. A little encouragement goes a long way. Substitutes, like plants, need consistent and appropriate attention helps them grow to be resilient.

Nourishment:

Plants flourish when provided with appropriate amounts of sunlight and food. Placement in the garden has to be planned to allow exposure to the right amount of sun. Encourage newly-hired substitutes to reflect on the level and location that their skills will fit best. Elementary school? Middle school? High school? Highly-impacted schools? Feeding the plants on schedule helps them reach their potential and maintain the blossom for an optimum length of time. Offer free scheduled training sessions for substitutes to continue to expand their skills and network with other teachers. Training sessions offered in the early evenings, from 4:30-7:30 or 5:00-8:00 p.m. for example, work well. To save money and showcase a school, hold the sessions at a school site in the district. Provide simple, inexpensive snacks, hold drawings, and award door prizes. Collecting the “free” things offered throughout the school year from schools is a great resource for these drawings. Check each school at the end of the year for leftover items from their school store, assemblies, or student senate activities. These items generally sport school logos which substitutes can use with pride. This is an easy way to support substitutes and promote unity.

The substance of the trainings, however, is the content of the sessions. Offer new classes, while repeating previously successful ones. For example, during a three-hour evening, offer two or three choices during each hour; repeat classes twice during one evening. A session offered during each time frame where substitutes can interact with a panel of experienced, successful substitute experts is a must—this provides opportunity to process information and network with one another. If research shows that engaging students in their own learning is the most effective approach, why would it be any different for substitutes? In addition to this session, offer other sessions that focus on classroom management, learning styles, dealing with difficult people, and coping with stress. School districts already have the resources to offer these topics using curriculum coordinators, staff developers, instructional coaches, and administrators and classroom teachers. Bring trainers and administrators from all three levels—elementary, middle, and high school. District trainers often enjoy the opportunity to share their expertise in a different setting. The benefits are immense for participants and trainers alike. Feed the plants on schedule—two to three times a season—to establish a routine.

Weed:

No garden becomes a feast for the eyes without careful attention to the weeds. Weeding takes time and focus, and is meticulous work. Without this attention to detail, however, the weeds will overtake the garden. It is also not something done once and then forgotten. To maintain a garden for the season, weeding must be an ongoing effort and priority. So it is with substitute employees. There are always substitutes that pick up the handbook, but never read or refer to it, much less follow the directions. Exposure to classroom management techniques seem to roll off their shoulders. Some substitutes need to be weeded out of the substitute pool, which takes time and focus. It can be difficult, but the results are worth it. Essentially, some substitutes are easily spotted as weeds: they have hit or yelled at a student. Other substitutes are frequently late, don't completely follow lesson plans, like to read at the front desk while the students work, or repeatedly cancel a job at the last minute, leaving school site personnel scrambling to find a replacement. Take the time to listen to the school site personnel, as well as the substitute, to measure the condition of the garden and each individual plant. This attention to detail and commitment of time sends the message that inappropriate behavior is not tolerated when brought to the attention of the office administrator.

Several practices provide consistent, adequate attention to weeding. Schedule time each week to deal with substitute issues/referrals—uninterrupted desk time for this work, free from meetings or other job responsibilities. When complaints are made, listen to both sides of the issue, the substitute's as well the teacher or administrator's. Substitutes frequently feel like they have been arbitrarily "pulled" without a second look. Don't assume anything ahead of time. Surprisingly, the most experienced, educated, retired teachers can be the most serious substitute problems. Likewise, school site personnel can be thoughtless and insensitive, and can precipitate problems with capable, effective substitutes. Adhere to the *Golden Rule*. Follow up all telephone conversations and meetings or conferences with written correspondence. The paper trail is the only way to track history, information, and decisions. Paperwork is respectful and informs all parties of results. Focus on routine maintenance; time allotted each week for weeding requires less and less time and effort as the season progresses. The garden, however, remains a feast for the eyes.

Our Garden:

The above garden has been planted in Jefferson County Schools, the largest school district in the state of Colorado, a suburban area that borders metropolitan Denver. With over 88,000 students and 5,600 teachers, the Substitute Office began planting this program in the Fall of 2001. During the first year, referrals (complaints) from the school sites dropped 15 percent. During the second year, referrals dropped 25 percent. Prior to implementation, approximately 1,200 substitutes were hired to work in the system each year, during one and a half hour orientations offered four times a month. During the past two years, an average of 750 substitutes was hired into the system each year during one of six full-day trainings. The fill rate for jobs has been 99.9 percent for the last two years. The automated system maintains a list of approximately 2,000 substitutes, with about 75 percent remaining active, i.e., accepting jobs throughout the school year. The garden is planted; continued efforts to water, nourish, and weed it will help it grow and maintain its beauty. The outstanding progress of substitute management in Jefferson County Schools has been beneficial to all parties. I would challenge other districts to make the most of their program with training, encouraging, and carefully reviewing their substitutes.

Recently retired from a 30 year career in public education, Chris Mikesell has been a math teacher for 23 years, a high school assistant principal for four years, followed by three years as an administrator in Human Resources. Responsible for managing the Substitute Office in Jefferson County Schools, Chris assembled a team of people who, under the guidance of USU SubSolutions, developed and implemented a substitute training program that successfully improved student learning during the absence of teachers. A consultant, Chris continues to work with teachers and substitutes in public schools.