

Supporting Substitute Success Saves Time

By Leslie A. Swetnam and Ruth Lane

“Who’s out today?” I asked. As our school secretary reeled off the list of teachers that would be absent, I mentally made a checklist of some potential problem classrooms. My next question was, “Who’s coming?” Every principal faces the challenge of integrating substitutes (guest teachers) into a smoothly operating school almost every day of the school year. Perhaps success in supporting the substitutes to effectively continue the instruction of students should be measured by the number of substitutes who stop by the office at the end of the day and remark that this has been one of the best days they have ever had and that they hope to be placed in this school again. No administrator has control over who will be out of the building because of personal or family illness on any given day, but s/he does have the opportunity to increase the chances of a day with a substitute being productive and pleasant for both the teacher and the students.

The serious shortage of substitute teachers has led to the use of substitutes with less educational background and experience in teaching. Because of the pressure for students to meet state standards, and perform proficiently on state achievement tests, and recognizing the ever increasing demands on a principal’s time, it is imperative to provide adequate professional support for substitute teachers at the district level. With the advent of computerized substitute placement through a centralized computer system, “good” substitutes are in a situation to decide which positions they will accept. It is simple to refuse an assignment at a school where they do not feel supported in their work. The fact that it is indeed difficult work is attested to by the number of retired teachers who recoil when asked if they plan to substitute teach. The obvious question is, “How can your school support substitutes, assist them in being effective, and ensure they want to continue coming back?”

Saving Everyone’s Time

When adequate introductory information is provided in a standard, prepared format, time is saved for both the school secretary and the

substitute. When effective classroom management support is provided to prevent and quickly deal with misbehavior, time on-task is saved for both the students and the principal, who may end up involved in resolving the problems. When the substitute is supported to do an effective job, students spend more time on-task learning and the returning teacher has less make up instruction to do. Consequently, the recruitment, retention, and instructional effectiveness of substitute teachers is increased.

Substitute Support Techniques

There are several ways schools can provide adequate support for substitutes. The first is a prompt and friendly greeting of the substitute in the main office. A letter briefly describing the most pertinent school policies and procedures is a timesaving way to communicate this important information. The information should include a description of any school-wide discipline system that may exist, a map of the school on which the location of the assigned classroom may be indicated, and direction to the teachers' lounge and adult restrooms. Emergency procedures for fires, tornadoes, medical emergencies, and lock downs should also be explained. The secretary should indicate on the letter the name of the absent teacher's "partner" teacher who can provide the substitute with any additional classroom specific support for their missing colleague.

In addition, guest teachers in the building need to be acknowledged by all staff members when in the hall, playground, or faculty lounge. No substitute likes to feel like the invisible person. If coffee or treats are available in the faculty lounge, guest teachers should be invited to help themselves. Some schools even present guest teachers with a small care package of instant coffee, a tea bag, a snack bar, coins for the pop machine, coffee mug, disposable cup, or anything else that might seem helpful. However, just the personal greeting from fellow staff members and an offer of assistance if needed can go a long way in establishing a supportive climate for substitutes. A special name tag for substitutes may help staff members extend these courtesies.

Substitute Folders

The principal's role in making sure that a day with a substitute is a day for learning starts at the beginning of the year. It is crucial to establish expectations for lesson plans and substitute folders and to monitor them on a regular basis to see that these resources are readily

available. Most substitute teachers really enjoy the opportunity to teach and want to be effective in the classroom. It is easier to be effective if the teacher leaves authentic assignments for instruction instead of busy work and time-filler video tapes.

An up-to-date substitute folder for each teacher is an absolute necessity. The folder should be revised no less than once a month and should be stored in the school office for easy access. The folder should include the daily time schedule for the teacher and class (including any students who leave the room for special services, band, etc.), a class list, necessary passes, and referral forms. The folder should also include directions and a password for using the classroom computer, the computerized attendance and lunch count system if one exists, the student restroom procedure, a seating chart, and the fire drill exit map (also posted in the room). In addition, the names of several reliable student ambassadors, a description of any special discipline programs or medical concerns that the substitute needs to be aware of, and a description of the teacher's discipline program in that specific classroom should be included. Possibly the most useful items to include in the folder are easily reproducible test preparation assignment sheets that reinforce skills or content already taught and likely to be found on the required proficiency tests used in the school. These assignments can be very useful in ensuring that the students continue to learn meaningful information if the classroom teacher has been unable to leave more specific plans or the substitute needs to replace an assignment that is not going well.

Classroom Management

Substitutes, including those who are retired teachers, are in agreement that classroom management (discipline) is the most challenging aspect of the job. Support in this single aspect of the job reassures individuals who are hesitant to work as substitutes, decreases the shortage, increases the effectiveness of instruction, and increases student learning. Classroom management never ceases to be a challenge for the regular classroom teacher. There is no reason to expect that a "stranger" in the room is going to possess more effective management abilities than the regular teacher. The substitute teacher is handicapped by not knowing the students' names and by not having an established relationship with them. In elementary schools, the specials teachers (art, PE, and music) can be very valuable resources since they have an instructional relationship with every student in the building.

There are some simple support measures for classroom management that schools can implement to increase the effectiveness of substitutes in their building. First, the regular classroom teacher can communicate expectations for class behavior in the case of their absence. When teachers establish expectations for classroom management at the beginning of the year, they can reiterate these expectations with positive or negative reinforcement based on the substitute's report each time they return from an absence. Letting students know that their teacher expects them to take responsibility for their behavior, even when they are absent, is vital. This puts peer pressure to positive use and can make the teacher's return less stressful since the substitute is more likely to be more effective.

Partner Teacher System

Some schools have implemented a partner system within their own faculty where teachers pair up so that they will have a colleague's room to send a student to for time-out supervision when other interventions have failed. This effectively removes the student from the attention s/he may have been seeking and gives both the student and the teacher a beneficial break. The use of this system in the elementary school gives substitutes the same support that secondary teachers have with the use of the referral system for discipline. In the case of a substitute, it allows them to return to instructing the students who are on task rather than wasting the class' time. If this system is established prior to the presence of the substitute, students already know how it works and what to expect. This can be the strongest support a substitute can be given. Teachers report that this pairing works best between two grade levels, in rooms that are in the same part of the school building. Students do not find it comfortable to be sent to a younger or older grade room. The other teacher is responsible only for supervising the student and determining when the student is under control and ready to return. Very often the other teacher will know the student and be more effective than the substitute could be in resolving the problem. This program also saves the principal time by resolving all but the most serious (dangerous) management problems that might have been referred to the main office.

Principal Presence

Another practice that is invaluable is for the principal or assistant principal to make it a practice to visit each substitute's classroom at

least once during the day. In secondary schools, the department chair or assistant principal can be asked to make this visit. The visit does not need to be more than a few minutes in length. It should be made clear in the introductory letter to the substitute that this will occur and substitutes should be informed that the purpose is to provide a supportive administrative presence with the students rather than to evaluate the substitute. Should there be any significant misbehavior occurring when the principal enters the room, the principal should address it in terms of “this is not the behavior we expect of students at this school under any circumstance,” so that the students recognize their responsibility to cooperate with substitutes. Once students pick up on the idea that principals show up every time there is a substitute they may consider the consequences before becoming disruptive. This short round of visits scheduled when the principal finds it convenient takes a lot less time than dealing with misbehaving students that are referred to the office, interrupting at any or all times of the day. The visits may also prevent learning time lost not only by the misbehaving student, but possibly the whole class.

District Support

It is imperative that school districts provide training for substitutes to prepare them for the challenges in the schools. It has been demonstrated that providing training increases the number of substitutes that can be recruited. One- or two-day training sessions can make a significant difference in substitute effectiveness as well as serving as an opportunity for substitutes to network and support each other. If your district doesn't provide this professional development support for substitutes (some may have no formal teaching experience due to the demand created by the shortage) principals should explain the necessity and demand it!

Another support is to designate experienced master substitutes to mentor less experienced substitutes. A mentor, who has faced the same challenges and who can meet with substitute networking groups or be available by telephone, can be invaluable to the new or struggling substitute. The district can recognize mentor substitutes by paying them an honorarium or a higher daily rate.

Conclusion

Classroom management support and relevant student assignments are the most significant ways to increase substitute effectiveness and student learning time. However, implementing all of these support

procedures (prompt greeting, substitute information letter, an up to date classroom folder, mentors, and district training) will make your building a preferred school for substitutes and a more effective learning environment for your students. It will at the same time consume less time for the principal, staff, and the returning classroom teacher.

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