

# Strategies to Prepare Classrooms for Substitute Teachers

## Introduction

Substitute teachers have one of the toughest jobs in the world. They are often expected to cover a classroom full of unknown students on very short notice. Unfortunately, substitute teachers may find upon arriving at the school that no lesson plans have been left for them, forcing them to improvise on the spot. To make matters even *more* challenging, substitutes typically show up in the classroom with little knowledge of school-wide procedures for responding to events such as specials, fire drills, and student dismissal.



Schools deal with the disciplinary fallout when substitute teachers do not have access to the information that they need to be effective instructors and classroom managers. Students can be quick to misbehave when they sense that a substitute teacher lacks confidence, is experiencing confusion, and does not know their names. Substitute instructors may be equally quick to react by sending those misbehaving students straight to the principal's office. No wonder so many school administrators and teachers dread having subs cover classrooms!

One excellent idea to help substitute teachers to exert greater control in the classroom is for every teacher to prepare an information binder designed explicitly for use by substitute instructors. At a minimum, the binder should include:

- *A student seating chart*
- *Building floorplan*
- *Copies of hall passes and office referral forms*
- *Phone numbers that the substitute should know*
- *Updated lesson plan*
- *Schoolwide emergency procedures*



Teachers can also take proactive steps to prepare students to be on their best behavior when a substitute is in the classroom. This intervention (a) provides a *group reward* if the class as a whole behaves well and (b) provides *individual consequences* when a particular student misbehaves.

## Materials

- Transparencies of *Substitute Teacher Feedback Form* and *Sample Apology Letter to Substitute Teacher*
- Overhead projector

## Preparation

- The classroom teacher creates a short menu of feasible, appropriate classwide rewards

## Intervention Steps

Step 1: *Introduce the Substitute Teacher Intervention to the Class.* Set aside 10 minutes of class time to present the intervention.

- Open the discussion by asking students to share their thoughts about the difficulties of being a substitute teacher. List these ideas on the board.
- Tell students that substitute teachers are an extension of the school's teaching staff and should be accorded the same respect as the classroom teacher. Emphasize that your expectations for student behavior are *no different* when a substitute is covering the room than when you are present.
- Inform students that substitutes who cover your classroom will keep a close eye on student behavior and will deliver a report back to the teacher at the end of the day. If the substitute decides that the classroom behavior has been sufficiently *positive*, he or she can inform the teacher that the students have earned a classwide reward. If any student should *misbehave* in the presence of the substitute, that student will later need to write an apology letter to the substitute.
- Using the overhead projector, take students through the sections of the *Substitute Teacher Feedback Form*. In particular, emphasize the substitute's power to decide (a) what individual students merit special mention for positive or negative behaviors and (b) whether the entire class deserves a collective reward for appropriate behavior.
- Show the transparency of the *Sample Apology Letter to Substitute Teacher*. Tell the class that any students singled out by the substitute for *misbehavior* will be expected to write a letter of apology to the substitute.
- *[Optional but recommended]* Inform students that parents of anyone who misbehaves will also receive a call from the classroom teacher to discuss the child's problem behaviors. Furthermore, the parents will need to read through and sign the student's letter of apology to verify that they read through it and talked the situation over with the child.

Step 2: *Implement the Intervention:* When a substitute is scheduled to cover your classroom:

- If possible, take time just before the day that a substitute will be in the room to remind students that you expect them to behave appropriately. Briefly review the main points of the intervention (i.e., group reward for positive behavior, individual letter of apology and parent conference for misbehavior).
- Leave a copy of the *Substitute Teacher Feedback Form* out for the substitute to complete at the end of the day.

Step 3: *Promptly Follow Through with Intervention Consequences:*

- As soon as you return to the classroom, be sure to read through the substitute teacher's feedback and respond accordingly.
- If the class has earned a group reward, either select a privilege, prize, or activity from the reward menu yourself or have the class vote on a reward from the menu.
- Praise any student noted by the substitute as having been especially helpful and well-behaved. *[Optional]* Give these students small individual rewards.
- Send any students reported by the substitute as having misbehaved to a quiet area (e.g., corner of the classroom, in-school detention room) to write out their letters of apology to the substitute. If necessary, help the students to address the envelopes and mail the letters.

*[Optional but recommended]* Follow up with a call to students' parents to discuss the students' misbehavior. Send a copy of the letter home with the student for parent signature.

- If the substitute requests on the feedback form that he or she would like to be contacted, call, write, or email him or her to find out more about how the substitute's day went in your classroom.

### **Tips**

*Check in on the Substitute During the Day.* With more and more classrooms equipped with telephones, some teachers exert a bit of extra classroom control when a substitute is covering their room by calling in at several points during the day. Substitutes are likely to appreciate these phone calls greatly! If they have questions about the classroom lesson or need to know what school-wide procedures to follow, the teacher can quickly supply this information. The teacher may also be able to advise the substitute about how to deal with a particularly challenging student's behavior or even problem -solve on the phone directly with the student.

### **Trouble-Shooting**

*The substitute did not fill out the feedback form.* With all of the demands on their time, substitute teachers may occasionally forget to leave the completed feedback form for you at the end of the day. Tell your students that reminding the substitute to complete the form might earn a child special mention as being *helpful* and help the entire class to earn a reward. If, however, the form is not filled out when you return to the room, see if you can get the substitute's phone number or email address to check in with him or her about how the day went. If you cannot get in touch with the substitute, you might collect a little circumstantial evidence about how your class behaved while you were gone. The office, for example, could check whether any students were sent from your room to the principal with disciplinary referrals, while neighboring teachers in the same hallway could describe for you what they observed going on in the room. If this indirect evidence suggests that the class kept its behavior within appropriate bounds, give them the reward!

### **References**

A special thanks to *Cheryl Wlodarski*, a teacher at a middle school in Central New York for contributing many of the ideas in this substitute-teacher strategy!

# Substitute Teacher Feedback Report



Date: \_\_\_\_\_

From: \_\_\_\_\_, Classroom Teacher, \_\_\_\_\_

Dear Substitute Teacher:

Hi! I want to make sure that you had a good experience today while covering my classroom. Please take a moment to complete this sheet. If something did not go well or students misbehaved, I will use your feedback to correct the situation in the future. Thank you!

1. What overall information, if any, would you like to share about how the day went?

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

2. [Optional] What are the names of students in the class today who:

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• were especially <b>helpful</b> and <b>well-behaved</b>?</li> </ul> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• presented <b>behavior/discipline</b> problems?</li> </ul> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p>
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• Do you feel that the class *as a whole* behaved well enough to deserve a reward? **\_\_Y\_\_N**

3. What would you recommend that I or other staff in the school do in the future to make your substitute teaching experience a smoother and more rewarding one?

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

4. [Optional] Please include your name and mailing address, phone number or email if you would like me to contact you to talk further about your experience in my classroom today:

Your Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Ph: \_\_\_\_\_ Email: \_\_\_\_\_

US Mail Address: \_\_\_\_\_

**Paragraph 1: Introduction**

The student:

1. Introduces self.
2. States the date the teacher was out of the classroom and the substitute teacher took his/her place.
3. Presents two reasons that being a substitute teacher can be difficult

**Paragraph 2: Body**

The student:

4. Acknowledges misbehaving
5. Describes misbehavior

**Paragraph 3: Conclusion**

The student:

6. Apologizes for the misbehavior
7. Describes plan to improve behavior for the next time that a substitute teacher covers the classroom
8. (Optional) Must review the letter with parent(s) and return with their

**Sample Apology Letter To Substitute Teacher**

*Dear Ms. Smith:*

**[1]** *My name is Thomas Morlin. I am a student in Ms. Tolerino's classroom at Baylor Elementary School. [2] On May 8, Ms. Tolerino could not be in the classroom, so you came in as a substitute teacher. [3] Being a substitute is hard, because you don't know the students' names and sometimes students act silly when there is a substitute in the room.*

**[4]** *During the class, I misbehaved. [5] I made a face at you and told another student that I didn't like you. The other kids laughed.*

**[6]** *I apologize for acting so badly when you were teaching our class. [7] The next time that I have a substitute teacher in my classroom, I will speak respectfully and not make faces.*

*Sincerely,  
Thomas Morlin*

**[8]** *Dear Parent(s): Please read this letter and discuss with your child how to improve his or her classroom behavior when a substitute teacher is in the classroom. Then sign the letter and have your child return it to me. Thank you.  
Mrs. Tolerino, Teacher*

*Signature of Parent(s): \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_*

\*Adapted from Wlodarski, C. (2001). *Tips to help your substitute teacher stay sane.*