

YOUR SUBSTITUTE'S DAY: DREAM OR NIGHTMARE?

BY MARLO M. SCHALESKY

I stand before your class, a small sea of wriggly bodies. My palms are sweaty, my mouth is dry. But I mustn't let your students know. I must appear calm, assured, in control. I am your substitute.

For me, it is the first day of school. I don't know the children before me. I don't know who is disruptive, who needs to be watched, whom I can trust. As I stand there, smiling at their bright, eager faces, I don't know if the school day will be a dream or a nightmare.

The students look back at me, my own questions reflected in their eyes. For them, it's like the last day of school. I probably won't be here tomorrow. They don't have to impress me. For all they know, they may never see me again. I can see some of their minds scampering toward mischief.

But having a substitute doesn't have to be a nightmare. There are steps that you, their "real" teacher, can take to help make the day a success. What you do before I come will determine much of what goes on in your absence.

During my years as both a substitute and a full-time teacher, I have found that these simple guidelines can make the difference between a dream and a nightmare:

Things to Do:

- *Make your lesson plans easy to find* (i.e., on your desk or a table in the front of the room). Nothing is worse for a sub than having to hunt for lesson plans as the stu-

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dents are coming into class.

- *Organize!* Keep everything necessary in one place. Separate the materials into neat piles with a top sheet identifying each pile.

- *Write out the day's schedule* on your lesson plans, including whether your sub has yard duty. He or she may not be familiar with the schedule at your school.

- *If the sub needs to do an art project, make sure it is simple and easy to explain.* Include an example of the final product.

- *Include information on recently covered material.* This will allow the sub to review with students who need it. Students can work in groups for review, allowing the older or more advanced students to help those who are struggling.

- *For older grades, have students read out loud.* Reading plays works the best, especially if you assign parts beforehand (suggest backup readers if those you assigned are absent that day).

- *Write out several essay questions* (i.e., for history or English). Allow the sub to choose whether to use the questions for a class discussion or write them on the board for silent work.

- *Videos can give the sub a much-needed break,* but only if the equipment is simple to use and already in your room.

- *Tell the sub what work should be collected,* what you will collect later, and what the students are to take home.

- *Keep an emergency lesson plan,* with

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all the needed materials, in a specific place. This will suffice if you can't get to school to deliver the day's plans.

Things Not to Do:

- *Don't assign anything that your class hasn't done before.* This will make both them and the substitute panicky.
- *Never plan any game or project with pieces that can easily become projectiles.* (This is the granddaddy of all nightmares!)
- *Don't demand that the sub lead a discussion with the class.* He or she may not be familiar enough with the material or your students to do so effectively.
- *Don't assume that the sub will know the material or be familiar with the books you're reading.*
- *Don't keep needed materials locked away in a cabinet.* There's a good chance your sub won't have a key.
- *Don't ask the sub to fetch needed equipment from somewhere else in the school.* He or she may not be familiar enough with the building to find the other room.
- *Don't assign filmstrips.* Anti-quoted machinery is often impossible to use!

A Few Good Ideas:

If you're wondering what activities to assign while you're gone, consider these well-trying ideas, which I and several other teachers have used with great success.

1. *Ask the substitute to read a story, or part of a longer story, aloud to the students.* Then have them draw a picture of a scene from the story. If they have their own books, have them copy a quotation from the book about the scene they drew. This can be done individually on construction paper, or in groups on large pieces of butcher paper. (Make sure the supplies are readily accessible and prepared if you choose group work.) Individuals or groups can then present their drawings to the class.
2. *Have students write a letter to you, their teacher, about what they especially like (and maybe even dislike) about the class.*
3. *Have students make up a word search or simple crossword puzzle using spelling words, history words, or even*

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math terms. Then have them switch papers so that another student can solve the puzzle. (This also can work well in groups.) Remember to provide graph paper.

4. *Have students make up 10 to 20 math problems similar to the ones in the current unit, with answers on a separate sheet.* The papers are then shuffled and redistributed for someone else to solve. After a specified length of time, they are returned to the original student for correction.

5. *If you choose to use a video, attach a worksheet that the students can fill out while the film plays.* Then, give the sub the option of collecting the worksheets or using them for a class discussion. You can also have the students write a summary or an opinion piece about the video. The sub can then choose several students to share what they wrote.

Help With Discipline

Even with perfect lesson plans, the day can still turn into a nightmare. All it takes is a few unruly kids. For many students, *substitute* means "anarchy." So how can you curb mischief and keep students on the learning track when you aren't there to oversee them? Here are some ways to help the sub prevent disruption:

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- *Make a seating chart so the sub will know the names of your students.*
- *List students who tend to misbehave.* Include a brief physical description of these students (sometimes tough kids will give the sub the wrong name). Also, list two or three reliable students whom the sub can count on.

• *Tell the sub who to contact in case of a problem (another teacher? the office?).* Describe the procedure to use if someone gets out of hand, and include the appropriate telephone and/or room number(s) on your lesson plans.

• *Describe your normal discipline procedure, and write out specifics for the sub to use.* You might suggest writing the names of disruptive students on the chalkboard. Then if students receive two check marks, they will be sent to the office. Or maybe you have a "time out" corner to which you send unruly students. How many warnings should be given before stronger action is taken? Are the students to be silent during work time, or do you allow them to talk quietly among themselves? Whatever procedure you describe to the sub, you should also explain to your students beforehand.

• *Before your absence, spell out specific consequences for bad behavior.* Make sure they are dire! Also, provide some kind of special award if the class behaves well (i.e., a trip, cookies, extra recess time, or a fun project).

Of course, the best precaution against a substitute's nightmare is good classroom discipline every day!

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Now, you've been gone for the day, and you've followed the above guidelines. You walk back into your classroom the next morning. The room is in order, and everything is in its place. You see a note that I, your substitute, have written. It says the class had a productive day, and I will be glad to sub for you again. You sigh and smile. Even in your absence, you made the school day a success! ☺

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