

Lessons from a year in education

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Contact: ianfoster@peopleassured.com

As a new school year dawns, I wanted to share my learnings from being a K-12 substitute/supply teacher during the 2022-2023 school year. I hope this will be helpful to others exploring teaching and educating the next generation.

Last year, as part of a continuing interest in the education sector, I made a commitment to spend 1 day a week teaching in the classrooms of my local public schools, running the People Assured business in parallel.

Over the course of the school year, I taught at 13 different schools — elementary, middle, and high — including IB, Montessori and magnet schools, and an EBD classroom. While the curriculum, high teacher commitment and the technology were the common factors I experienced, each school day and each school was entirely different.

Much of what I do in business has an educational component, and I hoped that the skills I've gained through developing people, teams, and organizations would be complementary in an educational setting.

Perhaps my over-exuberance to experience a wide variety of schools and subjects was a limiting and challenging factor, as almost every day felt like my first day in a new job!

I had gone in with the intention of 'focusing' on Math and Science, and perhaps PE — relative strengths of mine. However, sub-teaching is a matter of supply and demand and I quickly found myself signing up for Language Arts, History and Music.

I had been as well prepared (as I could have) through a substitute teacher training course, including teacher shadowing, but nothing can fully prepare you for being handed the keys to classrooms of 25-30+ students from extremely diverse backgrounds and stages of learning.

So, what has worked for me? ...so far...

1) Plan ahead — as best you can

- Reach out in advance to the regular classroom teacher, seeking to learn as much as possible about the topic(s) for that day/week. Teachers are very busy but the majority I reached out to were happy to share the lesson plan and classroom guidelines the day before I turned up — as well as how they handle classroom management. While you'll know the grade level and subject(s) when you sign up, understanding what you are expected to teach, and how, before you arrive allows you to spend time learning about the school and on building relationships with students
- Have a backup plan if possible. Some lesson plans were brief, and I faced situations where students finished early (or said they had), so it's good to have some generic material with you that might help you to engage students if Plan A isn't working.
- Ask if you'll be expected to use the classroom technology and, if so, how you switch between the various monitors and screens. Often substitute teachers are given

printouts, i.e., offline work, or students are given exercises on their laptops. If you can also access those online lessons, it gives you more chance to interact with students. It's tough to learn new technology in a short space of time, but helpful if you can.

2) First seek to build a relationship with students

- This is probably my biggest leaning point. During a day, you may meet over 100 students. As a substitute, unless we are a returner, we won't know students' individual learning needs, their personalities, how they are doing in the class, their backgrounds or lives outside of school.
- That's a lot to consider when you only have a small amount of time, but as teaching and learning success is influenced by student-teacher relationships, it's important to prioritize how you engage with students.
- There is no fast and easy way to build relationships, but over the course of the year I found that some small steps can help:
 - Stand at the classroom door as students arrive and greet them. Not everyone will acknowledge you, but many will. You can also seek to take attendance at the door, so you have name exchange from the start
 - Get to know students interests where you can; ask open questions
 - Do your best to spend some time with each student
 - Have brain breaks. Movement can help students engage and aid learning
 - Leverage your life experience to enhance the materials e.g., give an example of something you know about the subject or have applied in practice
 - Be consistent in your approach as best you can
 - Show you care and give choices and support to those who find things challenging or are acting up.

3) Seek to support everyone

- Aim to teach the whole class. It can be easy for your attention to be drawn to students who are either very engaged or whose behavior may be challenging. By becoming more aware of my own behavioral response, I've learned how to spend more time with students who may say little, and could go unnoticed unless I adopted a more conscious, proactive stance to working with the whole class
- Everyone learns differently. You may have strengths in one style of teaching but try and mix up spoken, written, visual, aural, and experiential learning — as well as individual and group work, online and offline.

4) Ask for help and guidance — and give feedback

- Classroom management is a difficult skill and task, even for more experienced teachers. The classroom teacher may be able to highlight students who need extra help, have greater behavioral challenges and may be lacking in coping skills. In my experience, the more you can learn from and copy the routines, rules and guidelines applied by the regular classroom teacher the more likely students will respond favorably to you. By unknowingly deviating from the protocols students are used to, you are creating a disconnect to the way the class normally runs. Elementary schoolers will be quick to put you straight — informing you of classroom norms.
- You may receive information about student and class incentives, consequences, and rewards. It can be a lot of information to process but apply these the best you can

- The introduction of a substitute teacher can often be a trigger for students to behave differently and test boundaries (differentiatedteaching.com). Offering students choices and sharing that you may need to call the front office can often be enough to quell a situation. Let the class know you'll be giving feedback to their regular teacher. However, if there are student(s) who continually disrupt the class or whose behavior becomes uncontrollable it's important to follow through and call (the front office) for assistance
- Each state and school district will have policies for cell phone use; school administrators may apply variations. I experienced challenges in implementing cell phone policies, so I was mindful to ask teachers about their experience and suggestions for executing them
- After class, provide feedback notes to the teacher so they know where you got to, where to pick up from, and provide feedback on behavior including positive mentions — and don't forget to say thanks!

Finally, be kind to yourself. Stepping into a classroom is stepping into the unknown. The needs are great, and the demands are high, but so are the rewards — such as when there's a learning "aha" moment with a student or group, seeing a student succeed at something they might previously have struggled with, or when a student waves to you upon your return.

I still have so much to learn from experienced teachers and other mentors; I'm grateful to all those who have helped me to date.

Bibliography

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