

Tips for Supply Teachers: Do More Than Just Survive!

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Tips for Supply Teachers: Do More Than Just Survive!

"You're a SUPPLY TEACHER?" A mixture of sympathy and amusement frequently crosses the face of someone who has just learned of my career choice. No doubt they are recalling one of their own childhood experiences with an unfortunate fill-in! We've all had them, haven't we? No, substitute teaching is not for cowards. However, despite its unique set of challenges and pitfalls, supplying has the potential to be a very enjoyable and rewarding way to teach.

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I have been an elementary substitute teacher for over eight years now and have taught everything from Junior Kindergarten to the Eighth Grade, as well as Special Education and French. What I have done here is recorded some questions that may have (or should have!) crossed my mind over the course of my teaching career. Then, I have attempted to share some of the answers I have discovered through my own experiences with students and teachers along the way.

If you are new to this business of supply teaching, take heart! It really can be a wonderful way to spend time with a variety of children and other teaching professionals.

A. DUTIES AND RESPONSIBILITIES OF A SUPPLY TEACHER

In a nutshell, what is the role of the supply teacher?

I always try to approach my job as a "don't rock the boat" type of situation. To me, this means trying to make the students' day run as normally as possible. Obviously, I am not the regular classroom teacher and will not really be able to duplicate a "normal day" (I discuss this reality with the students), but I try to learn any routines as quickly as possible and stick to them. If I am talking to the classroom teacher before I go in, I ask about routines. The more time you spend in a classroom, the easier this will come. The students get to know you and you get to know them and their expectations. What you do is important! You are providing the students with leadership and routine in the absence of their regular teacher. Approach the situation calmly and confidently, but be alert to cues of discomfort or confusion from the students.

"...try to learn any routines as quickly as possible and stick to them."

There is so much to think about in a new classroom! What if I forget to do something important?

When the classroom teacher returns, there are certain things s/he will expect to find. These I consider to be the primary duties of the supply teacher:

"Approach the situation calmly and confidently, but be alert to cues of discomfort or confusion from the students."

1. Daily Lessons

Everything required by the dayplan should have been taught or marked incomplete if you didn't get to it. Submitted seatwork should be graded and placed in clear view on the teacher's desk. The next day's plan should be filled out to whatever extent possible if the teacher had not already done so before his/her absence.

2. Yard/Hall/Lunch Duties

If the daybook is unclear in this area, it is essential that you search out the information as soon as you have a minute. I can recall several times in my early (and sometimes later!) years of supply teaching when I "remembered" one of my duties on my way back home! Student safety can hinge on teacher supervision and we are legally bound to fill this role.

3. Condition of the Classroom

Whenever possible, try to leave the classroom neater than you found it. This does not mean re-organizing or moving things! Just straighten and tidy up wherever you can. Sometimes if you've dealt with a particularly difficult group of students, the room will be pretty messy. I would be sure to make note of this in your report to the regular teacher - older students especially are often held accountable for the havoc they've wreaked and will frequently be required to clean up the mess themselves.

"Student safety can hinge on teacher supervision and we are legally bound to fill this role."

4. Written Report to the Teacher

Leave a brief but clear note for the classroom teacher letting them know how things went in their absence. They'll need to be aware of any lessons you did not teach. (By the way, never tackle anything you're not confident enough to teach. The students will only end up confused and in need of re-instruction.) Provide details on student behaviour, both positive and negative, giving names and descriptions of incidents wherever necessary. Record any work assignments (for home or in class) and let the teacher know where the students' work for the day is being stored. (i.e. Did you collect the journals? Have them mark each other's math drills?) Lastly, clip any notes from the office or parents onto the teacher's report.

"...never tackle anything you're not confident enough to teach...The students will only end up confused and in need of re-instruction."

B. GETTING TO KNOW YOU...MARKETING YOURSELF

I've just been added to our school district's supply list and am eager to get to work. But no one is calling me! How do I get my name out there?

This question will not apply to all supply teachers, seeing as some districts use a central calling list where the board office just goes down the list and calls the names in turn. Many, however, leave the supply calling to the principals, vice-principals or even teachers themselves. If this is the situation you find yourself in, you can do several things to market yourself.

When I first graduated, there was a surplus of supply teachers and, therefore, a lot of competition for those early-morning phone calls! I had some business cards printed with my photo on them and went from school to school every September to introduce myself to staff members there. Later, many teachers told me that they called me because they could put a face to the name on at least one of the business cards they had piled on their desk.

"I had some business cards printed with my photo... they called me because they could put a face to the name on at least one of the business cards..."

Be creative - do something no one else has thought of! Some friends of mine who got married right after they graduated from The Faculty of Education (Teacher's College) came up with a great idea. They promoted themselves as a "Two For One" deal. Their posters were up in staff rooms across the city- "Call this number and you'll have twice the chance of getting a supply when you need one."

Truth be told, you won't have to "market yourself" for that long. Once you've established yourself as a conscientious and hardworking supply teacher, the calls will start coming in.

"Once you've established yourself as a conscientious and hardworking supply teacher, the calls will start coming in."

As always, the best advertising is by word of mouth and we all know that teachers share great resources!

C. BEFORE THE STUDENTS ARRIVE

If you only had time to do three things before the first bell rang, what would they be?

Depending on when you received the phone call for this teaching spot, you could have very little time to prepare for your day. When I am walking into an unfamiliar classroom, my top three priorities are:

1. Check fire alarm exits.
2. Draw up an empty seating plan. (I check the teacher's desk and daybook for a completed one first!) Once the students arrive, a responsible student fills it in for me or I just fill it in myself as the day progresses.
3. Familiarize myself with the daybook. Even if I only have time to prepare for the first half or quarter of the day, I make sure I know exactly what I'm doing and where all the necessary materials are.

The three most important items to do before the kids walk in are: 1. Check the emergency exits; 2. Draw up an empty seating plan; and 3. Familiarize yourself with the daybook.

What are some other things I can do to help prepare myself for the day?

I try to get a few things on the board, first of all. My name and the day's date are essentials. I often draw a large empty box with the heading "Today's Superstars" or "Thursday's Top 10." This piques the students' interest and gives me a chance to fill them in on this system right from the start of the day. (More details on this classroom management technique later.) Also, depending on the grade level, I often find it helpful to write the day's schedule on the board. Older students appreciate this kind of structure in light of their regular teacher's absence.

"...introduce myself to the principal, vice-principal, secretary and neighbouring teachers."

Something else I always try to do is to introduce myself to the principal, vice-principal, secretary and neighbouring teachers. It's very helpful to ask about school discipline policies. For example, is it all right to send an unruly student out into the hall for a few minutes?

"It's very helpful to ask about school discipline policies."

If there's a problem on the recess yard, do I have students stand on the wall? go to the office? report to a detention room? Every school will be a little bit different and the more familiar you are with the systems, the easier it will be to deal fairly with the students.

D. CLASSROOM MANAGEMENT

Do kids today still put their supply teachers through the same things we used to?

Yes. Next question.

Can you elaborate?

Well, all right. The rules of the game haven't changed much, from anything I've seen anyhow. Kids still want to see how far they can push the envelope and just how tough this newcomer really is. Student behaviour varies widely from class to class and school to school, of course. Some groups are so compliant you feel like you've died and gone to heaven. With others you just feel like you've died. ☺

How should I approach a new class? I don't want to be super serious but if I'm too nice they'll walk all over me!

In my opinion, the number one tool in maintaining a positive classroom climate is teacher attitude. Herein lies the key to successful supply teaching.

First of all, think of the situation from your students' perspective. For example, "Mrs. Brown is gone today and I've never seen THIS woman before in my life. What if she lets Robbie pick on me all day like he did at the start of the year? What if the class is as bad as it was for the LAST supply? If I don't go along with everyone else, I'll never hear the end of it....I might as well start giving her some grief right now..."

Despite the bravado and bluster most supply teachers receive from their students, the truth is that many kids are still afraid of their substitutes OR the insecure peer situations they find themselves in due to the absence of their regular teacher. The best way we can counteract this fear factor is to approach the class with confidence (actual or fabricated - either will do!), poise and sincerity.

One of my own personal guidelines is: NO YELLING! Obviously, I slip up, but, as a rule, I find yelling to be totally ineffective. It accomplishes only three things. First, it sends a clear message that you have lost control. Second, it frightens some of the students (not the ones you wanted to scare, either.) Third, it only serves to raise the noise and energy level in the classroom. Unless I am supplying

"...and there is nothing new under the sun."

Ecclesiastes 1:9

"Some groups are so compliant you feel like you've died and gone to heaven. With others you just feel like you've died."

"... the truth is that many kids are still afraid of their substitutes OR the insecure peer situations they find themselves in due to the absence of their regular teacher."

"...approach the class with confidence...poise and sincerity."

How to **lose** the class in one easy step...START YELLING ☹

with a very familiar group of students, I almost always find that raising my voice has a negative impact on the classroom atmosphere. Honestly, why should the students care if a total stranger is unhappy with them?

Obviously, not all children are afraid of their supply teachers. These particular individuals typically make themselves known early in the day, often even before the first bell rings. I couldn't count the number of faces I've seen light up at the classroom window as mischievous little eyes peer in to discover...AHA! "We've got a sub today!!!" The news spreads like wildfire and the scheming begins. The inevitable power struggles between us and our students are enough to chill the blood at times. But I still say attitude is everything (well, almost everything.)

"...AHA! "We've got a sub today!!!" The news spreads like wildfire and the scheming begins."

One of my very wise mentors once told me: "Never let them see that they've come up with something new." That advice has held me in good stead. If at all possible, I try to maintain a calm, relatively quiet, but confident demeanour with the kids.

If I realize early in the day that the class is planning to give me a "run for my money," I'll often tell them: "You know what, guys? I've been doing this for a long time and I've seen it all before. I'm not going to yell and scream at you. We're going to have a regular day, doing the regular work you would have done with Mr. Smith. If anyone decides they don't want to have that kind of day, they're free to spend their time at the office instead. The truth is, you're coming back here tomorrow and I'm not. Whatever happens today, Mr. Smith will discuss with you in detail when he returns."

"I try to maintain a calm, relatively quiet, but confident demeanor with the kids."

Often, just an honest statement like this, one that acknowledges the possibility of misbehaviour, will defuse some of the potential problems from the start. Not that everyone will just fall in line that easily, of course. Someone (maybe several "someones") will undoubtedly cross the line and then it will be up to you to act decisively in order to establish your role for the day.

"an honest statement...one that acknowledges the possibility of misbehaviour, will defuse some of the potential problems from the start."

So, in a nutshell, be positive whenever possible. Don't take poor behaviour personally. Smile and laugh when it's appropriate. Point out the student behaviours you're looking for. Use students' names whenever possible (carry that seating plan with you and learn it!) Keep your voice calm and even. Younger students especially respond very well to whispers and quiet tones of voice. Try your very best to ENJOY the children you are teaching today!

What are some practical "tricks of the trade" you've found helpful in classroom management?

Keep reading and find out...

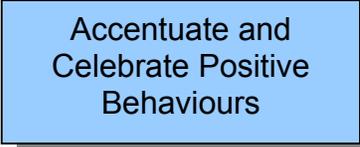


The Top Six *Survival* Tips

Here are the best techniques I have found to encourage positive behaviour in students and to make my day run more smoothly:

1. The Superstars / Top Ten...

I referred to this technique earlier. Draw an empty box on the board before the students arrive and give it an attention-grabbing title. Once the children are seated, they will most likely ask you about it. Explain that this section of the blackboard will not be erased after school, but will be left up for Mrs. Jones to see the next morning. (I usually write PLO beside it and something like, "Mrs. Jones, look at us!")



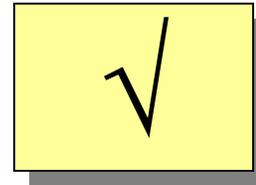
Accentuate and
Celebrate Positive
Behaviours

Then pick up a piece of chalk and tell them that this "magic chalk" just may appear on their desk at any time during the day. If they happen to be working quietly and notice it there, they may sneak up to the board and add their name to the list inside the box. (I only use the "magic chalk" with younger students. Older kids don't usually get too excited about it!)

At the end of the day, whoever has their name on the board is part of that day's "Top Ten" or "Superstars" or whatever heading you've chosen. Discuss the kinds of attitudes and behaviours that will lead them to this privileged position; also discuss which behaviours will require their names to be erased from the list.

2. Checklists

For older students who are having trouble getting settled down to work, I sometimes grab a class list from the desk and start walking up and down the aisles with it and a pencil in hand. I gradually explain to the students that I am going to be giving out points all day as they work. They will get a checkmark beside their name every time I look at them and see them working. I will only share the "scores" with them every quarter of the day (ie. each recess) and at that time I will give them the top five competitors of the moment. This list will be left for the regular teacher, of course, who may choose to reward the winners in any way s/he chooses.



3. Incentives

Another approach that has worked for me with challenging Junior/Intermediate classes is to offer them an incentive to work towards as a class. For example, in warmer weather, I have told kids that I am planning to take them outside at the end of the day for a soccer game (or whatever else they're into) and hope that they can retain that privilege through hard work and co-operation.

Obviously, this incentive can take any form. Find out what they like. It could just be a half hour of "free time" to read, get on the computer, play card games, etc. Set some terms and boundaries and then stick to them.

"Find out what they like."

You might have to cut the reward in half because they "owe" you time for poor behaviour or the like.

4. Group Competitions

Primary and Junior students seem to thrive on this type of reward system. Draw a chart of some kind on the chalkboard that divides the kids up into teams. (I usually base it on rows or seating groups.) From there, it's pretty straightforward. If a team (row, group) is working well on something, call one of those students up to give their team some points on the board. This can be used as a deterrent to poor behaviours as well - kids are not too happy about erasing their team's points! At the end of the day, heartily congratulate the winning team and either hand out your own prize (you may have brought a package of stickers along....) or let them know you'll be informing the regular teacher of their wonderful effort.

"...kids are not too happy about erasing their team's points!"

5. Time Owed

This technique has helped me immensely in sticking to my "No Yelling" policy. Things can get pretty chatty when kids have a supply teacher. In fact, they can get downright loud. Rather than raise my voice to match the noise level, I will sometimes walk up to the board, draw a small box right at the top of it and write inside: 3 minutes. Soon someone will ask me what's going on and I will explain that since everyone has chosen to waste the last three minutes of our class time, they now "owe" me three minutes of their free time. They may choose to buy this time back by working quietly from now on, or they may continue to add to the time owed. It's their decision. In most cases, the kids really enjoy whittling away at it until the big 0 is back in the box. The numbers may rise and drop several times over the course of the day, but, generally, this approach is quite effective overall.

"These wonderful people are invaluable for the information they can provide and for the rapport that most of them have developed with the students."

6. Don't forget the EA's.

Although not really a "technique," one of your most effective classroom management strategies is to consult the Resource Teacher and especially the Educational Assistant (or tutor escort) that may be assigned to your classroom. These wonderful people are invaluable for the

information they can provide and for the rapport that most of them have developed with the students.

They can clue you into the regular routines of the room and where to find many of the supplies you'll need. They usually know exactly where the "hot spots" are as far as behaviour issues are concerned and, more often than not, are already involved in some type of behaviour modification program with the students in question.

A friendly word of caution is in order here. Remember that assistants and tutor escorts are in the classroom to work with the students, not to run errands for the teachers. Be sure to let them do their job while you do yours.

“...let's keep our senses of humour intact and enjoy the moments as they come!”

Final Notes:

That's it! Hopefully these "more-than-survival" tips will have given you an idea or two or maybe just reminded you of how important your job really is. There are going to be good days and not-so-good ones, of course, but let's keep our senses of humour intact and enjoy the moments as they come!