



Substitute Teaching

THE ROADMAP TO SUCCESS

Chandra Madafferi



Introduction

Being a substitute teacher can sound like a scary endeavor, especially if you do not have any classroom experience, however, with a little planning, you can do it! Most substitute jobs are considered single-day jobs, which means you pick a day that you cover for a teacher, and at the end of the day you go home — that's it!

Typically, in a single-day job you are monitoring the students and guiding them through their lessons throughout the day and not necessarily instructing or teaching content. If it is a planned absence, most teachers take great care to set the class up for success, often working on projects or assignments that were given the day before. As you get more comfortable in a classroom, school or district, let the building secretary, administration, and/or teachers know! They want to bring back individuals who will help provide the best education for their students and you are the key to that!

Before you take your first job, you should think about a few things to help you find the best fit for you. What kind of classroom do you see yourself being comfortable in? What age of students do you think you would enjoy working with? Do you like young children and would enjoy working with them or would you prefer to have students that are a bit more independent? Most people do not know that upper elementary grades and middle school students are far more independent than most people think.

Would you like to meet your students in the morning and get your day established, maintaining the majority of the same students throughout the day or can you handle a new set of students every hour with a day that has more variety? If so, a middle or high school may be for you. What about students with disabilities? Figuring out your comfort level will help you be successful.

Prior-to-Substitute Teaching Checklist

- Decide on what grade levels you are and are not comfortable with and create boundaries for yourself.
- Choose where you would like to substitute and go on the school district's website. You should find information about substituting and how to apply in the employment or human resources section.
- Fill out the substitute application and/or register with the substitute employment agency that a district uses.
- Consider sending a simple email or letter to the building principal letting them know that you are interested in substitute teaching in their building and let them know a little about yourself including your experience and education. A principal will welcome this and often forward your information to their teachers in the building.

Reflections:

Purposeful Planning

Subbing agencies or school districts will typically give you a short training on how to access a job finder system that a district uses to list their substitute job openings and they are usually online. After you have figured out what grade levels you are comfortable with and have registered to substitute in your desired district, you can log in and choose the job that you would like. Once you have taken the job, you should do the following the night before subbing to make your day as easy as possible:



- Pack a lunch, a snack and a water bottle. You may not have time to get to the cafeteria and figure out how to buy lunch in the building. Navigating a school may be daunting for the novice substitute, especially with students packed into noisy crowded hallways.
- Dress appropriately for the grade level. Elementary schools are a bit more casual. Consider comfortable shoes at all levels as some schools are very large and there is often a lot of walking and standing on your feet monitoring students.

It is important that you take time to care about your appearance, as it will give you more confidence as you work with the students. As a general rule of thumb, you should not wear jeans or t-shirts. Look professional by wearing a nice shirt or sweater. Some men wear ties, but it is not necessary. It is acceptable in most schools to wear clean tennis/gym shoes with nice cotton dress pants, again with a nice shirt or sweater.

- Consider bringing a pair of tennis shoes in your car or bag in case you are asked to sub in a Physical Education (gym) class. You should know ahead of time if you are choosing a gym class, however, there are times that you may be asked to sub on the planning time or the school administrator may decide to switch subs in the building for many different reasons.

Reflections:

Upon Arriving to the School

- Locate the main entrance of the building and the staff parking. Plan to arrive at least 20 minutes prior to the school day to get the key to let the students in and figure out what you are doing for the day.
- Once in the office, let them know you are a substitute and you will be directed to a building secretary who will give you your assignment. Hopefully, you will receive a folder or binder with information, but if not, please ask and make sure you have the following resources:
 - The phone or technology policy in the school.
 - The map of the school, including emergency exits and locations.
 - Class lists.
 - Passwords for the internet.
 - School schedule including times.



In addition, make sure you know the following:

- Figure out technology for subbing and related activities, like logging in to the computer, including guest username and password. Do you know how to use the classroom's projector if you need to?
- What is the lunch procedure for students? Is there a lunch count that needs to be turned in to the office?
- Ask if there are fire, weather or other drills scheduled for the day. It is not good to be taken off guard and this will help to let your students know.



Finally, do not be surprised if you are subbing on the teacher's "planning time" or hour of "specials" (like PE, Art or Music). Since substitutes are in short supply, you may be asked to sub for the entire day.

Reflections:

Before Students Arrive



- Once in the classroom, look around and find the sub plans for the day. Mentally plan your day and have all the materials needed. If necessary, be ready to use the technology in the classroom such as the computer and/or projector.
- When do students arrive, go to lunch, and leave for the day? Are there any scheduled recess times or “specials” that you need to know for the day?
- Figure out how you will call on students. Is there an established procedure? For example, some teachers have popsicle sticks with students’ names on them and draw them from a can to call on students so it is random. If you cannot see a procedure, have students take out a scrap piece of paper and write their name and one cool fact about themselves on the paper. Collect the papers and use them throughout the day/class to call on them. This is better than calling on the student who always raises their hand.
- Locate the bathroom and drinking fountain for you and for the students. Many elementary schools have bathrooms in the classrooms for the students to use. See if there are any listed procedures for students to use the bathroom.

Reflections:

📍 Classroom Procedures & Best Practices

- Introduce yourself, more than just your name, and let them know why you are subbing. Make some personal connections with the students. Put them at ease, especially if their teacher's absence is unplanned.
- Smile. Be warm, yet firm, as you do not want students to misbehave and not complete tasks/assignments.
- Use positive language such as "walk please" versus "don't run" or "sit quietly" instead of "stop talking".
- Continuously move around the room or sit in a chair/stool in the front or middle of the room ensuring students are on task and you are available for help. "Proximity control" means that if you see a student getting off task, quietly stand by them and see if this encourages them to get back to work. This should be enough to get most kids back on task. Use positive language or redirection. If the student still chooses not to do their work, look at the class/school behavior policy/plans for next steps.

📍 Develop Relationships

- Compliment students who are "doing the right thing" noting what you are complimenting them for:
- "Thank you for getting right to work." or "Thank you for putting away your phone."
- Many districts hire building or permanent subs. If you enjoyed working in the classroom or building, work to build a relationship with the office staff and the other staff members around you.
- Write a note for the teacher on the sub plans or a separate piece of feedback with general information. Feel free to leave post-it notes on students' assignments or any materials that were collected from students. Close with something positive such as "I hope you have a great day" or a positive compliment about the classroom, students, or school.
- Put the classroom back in order if it was moved around in any way.





Part 2

Grade Level Specific Information: Finding Your Niche

Elementary

You are responsible for the child for the entire portion of the day including welcoming students, helping them get their coats and belongings put away, and finding their seats. Elementary children require a lot of patience and care as many students struggle with attention, listening and completing tasks. Letting them know what is coming and announcing transitions (moving from one activity to the next) will help your day and theirs go more smoothly.

- Look at the classroom walls for tools that the teacher uses to manage the classroom such as job boards, word walls, circle time space, a place for reading, centers, etc. These can be great resources to help use the systems that are already in place and with which the students are familiar.
- Consider writing a schedule on the board for the day. Say things like:
 - ➔ “First, we are going to do _____, then we are going to do _____, and last we are going to do _____.”
 - ➔ “Okay boys and girls, we are almost done with _____ (the first thing) and soon we will be moving onto _____.”

Continually helping students with transitions will help them know what is next and what they need to be doing. Being proactive can help reduce misbehaviors. Most students' attention is only equal to one minute for every year they are old and that is a struggle for some. Remember, especially in the early years, many students have not been diagnosed yet with learning disabilities or behavior challenges, but it doesn't mean that they don't exist. Some suggestions for working with elementary students are:

- Offer incentives if appropriate to encourage students to complete work.
- Recognize that most students cannot do much independently.
- Plan on modeling what students need to do and repeat directions if necessary. This means to do an example first or specifically show them what to do and what the end project needs to look like. Many students need to see this example before completing a task.
- Check for understanding by asking a student to repeat back to you what they are supposed to do.
- Look to see if there are students that will be leaving for special services such as speech, social work or working with a special education teacher, so you can help remind that student prior to their time.
- Always have students quietly line up when walking them to specials, lunch, or to go home at the end of the day. Ask if there is a line leader job and if not, choose a student that is behaving. With lower elementary students, make sure to say something like, "I chose _____ because they were sitting quietly and completing their work." Or do something totally random such as finding the person whose birthday is closest to that day.



Tips

- Bring a bag with you with a few things such as a children's book for reading aloud, possibly one for the season or with a positive lesson.
- Bring a set of coloring pages for lower elementary and/or word searches for upper elementary or a more complicated coloring page for upper elementary. Make copies in the office if possible when you arrive. Usually, 30-35 copies will do.

Middle School (MS)/High School (HS)

Middle school students range from 11 to 14 years old depending on the makeup of the school. High school students can range from 14 to 19 years old depending on the grade levels in the building. Try to connect and build rapport with students right away and decide what priorities will define that relationship and be consistent every day.

- Building rapport with students and deciding priorities are keys to success when working with older students as well as understanding it is natural for teenagers to push boundaries with any substitute teacher. Encourage them, redirect them and ask if they need help, however, if they are not working let them know that it is fine but they just cannot prevent others from working. Follow up with a note for the teacher about the students who chose not to work or any that were amazing stand-outs of good behavior.
- Review the phone policy in the class and know what permissible phone use is allowed, if any. Try to monitor if students are playing games. Discourage this and/or use it as an incentive. Once their work is done, they can go on their computers and play games or work on other homework.
- Many middle schools have a multiple-period day with students rotating every hour similar to a high school. Introduce yourself every hour if appropriate.



Tips

- Have a backup trivia game or activity in case students finish early.
- MS/HS students are usually with you for about an hour and you will have a few parts to your sub plans. Go over what they need to finish in the class period and how you want them to work. Set clear boundaries from the beginning to help them be successful.

Public Education and Unions



Now more than ever, unions are important as they protect workers' rights. Often unions get an unfair rap, however, when it comes to education they are often the only voice advocating for educators and students on many policies.

Founded in 1852, the Michigan Education Association (MEA) has a mission to protect, advocate, and advance the rights of all education professionals to promote quality public education for all students. Through collective action, MEA makes changes that impact the public education and political landscape to improve the lives of students and educators.

At the Local Level

Did you know that a local school district typically has one or more groups that are organized into local unions? Teachers, school counselors, social workers, and therapists are organized into the professional union affiliated with the state union. MEA locals are normally called Education Associations. Members join the local and elect officers to represent them on issues related to their careers such as the length of day, schedule, calendar, class size, professional development, curriculum, pay and benefits.



Simply said, they bargain educators' working conditions which are, literally, students' learning conditions. In addition, many support staff such as bus drivers, school secretaries, custodians, and food service workers are also organized into local unions often bargaining around school safety in addition to wages and benefits.

Sadly, in some states, collective bargaining is prohibited, which means that people are not able to come together to negotiate wages and benefits with their employers and it is apparent in their salary and benefit averages. Michigan has been fortunate to have collective bargaining rights and our students have greatly benefited from negotiated contract language such as low class sizes and mandatory recesses.

At the State Level

On a broader scale, the Michigan Education Association (MEA) believes that every student deserves a quality education regardless of where they live and MEA advocates for policies that work toward this goal. In addition, MEA supports legislation that protects the education profession and workers' rights. MEA works at the state level on multiple initiatives that not only improve the lives of our students but protect policies for our members related to their benefits.

MEA advocates for policies that support substitute teachers and offers quality training and other resources, like this booklet, through MEA's Center for Leadership & Learning, to help you succeed as a substitute teacher. There are many amazing member benefits that MEA has to offer. If you are hired as a substitute in a public school district, you are eligible to become an MEA member.

At the National Level

MEA is a part of the National Education Association (NEA) which works nationally on policies that help promote a quality public education regardless of where a child lives. NEA works on legislation to help students and educators, such as reducing standardized testing. Significant funding for local school districts, for things like free meal programs, comes from the federal government and is especially important in the areas that help students who are diverse learners.

It is important to remember that, from the very beginning, teachers have been advocates for students. In the earliest days of public education, teachers had to fight to keep students in classrooms (and out of factories) and had to fight to have enough wood for classroom stoves. While the topics have changed, the commitment educators have to their students' success hasn't.

Public education has been under attack in Michigan for many years and the educator shortages are just a reflection of this. The education profession is crucial to a productive society as it helps to create all other professions. MEA, and other unions that represent individuals who work in schools, collectively bargain for high-paying jobs and quality benefits in order to attract the best and brightest into the profession.



Our students need us more than ever and our schools are amazing places for the magic of learning to happen. Thank you for taking the time to read this as you try to be the most successful substitute teacher and member of your local school community.

About the Author

Chandra Madafferi is a lifelong educator who has served since 2017 as the Vice President of the Michigan Education Association.

With almost 20 years in the classroom, Chandra taught special education, on-line recovery, Health, and Health for English language learners. After starting her teaching career in Oakland County's Huron Valley Schools, she moved to Novi Community Schools where she spent the majority of her career. While teaching, Chandra maintained a full-time administration position for over 10 years in the Bloomfield Hills Schools as a coordinator of a summer program (SCAMP) for individuals with disabilities.

Chandra earned a Bachelor's degree in Special Education, Health Education, and Therapeutic Recreation from Central Michigan University and a Master's degree in Education from the University of Michigan-Dearborn. She has completed a two-year teacher leadership program through the Galileo Leadership Institute for educators in the Metro Detroit area and is a fellow in the Education Policy Fellowship Program hosted by Michigan State University.

For more information, please visit MEA.org.

This booklet was made possible by:



Special thanks to many MEA staff for their work contributing to this project, including editing and design.



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