

Supporting Subs in Start-of-Year Vacancies

A Practical Toolkit

School districts across the country are reporting more start-of-year vacancies and continue to focus on last minute recruitment efforts. It's critical that school and district leaders turn their attention to preparing and supporting the staff who will be starting the year with students. That's why we've created this toolkit to share best practices for supporting the substitute teachers - and coaches, specialists, and central office staff - who step up to take these assignments.

A few reflections from substitute teachers who have served in start-of-year vacancies:

"I wished that my principal remembered that I've never done this before. This isn't filling in for a day or two, it's being responsible for a class in a subject I don't know anything about. It felt like the principal forgot and because they are so busy, assumed I would just figure it out on my own."

"I really wanted to create a more welcoming environment for my students but didn't know if I was allowed to so I kept the classroom plain. It was sad to walk into that classroom each day, especially as I had no idea how long I would be there."

"There was so much I didn't know about and no one was there to help. I was trying to create plans from scratch - now I know about standards alignment, differentiation, and things like that, but when I started, I had no idea. I didn't know how to talk with families, what could and could not be shared, and when and how to reach out. I didn't know how and when to use things like Google Classroom and there was a lot of confusion about getting access. It was stressful and I didn't want to fail my students."

What's Here

1. **Advice for Leaders:** The key areas to focus on to support subs in start-of-year vacancies and practical short-term advice.
2. **Toolkit for HR and Principals:** Our best practices guide for setting up subs in long-term positions. The guide outlines how HR and principals can work together to make sure that long-term subs have access to essential information and are introduced to the school community. It includes sample agendas, checklists, and email templates.



Key Areas to Focus On & Advice for Leaders

Start-of-year vacancies bring unique challenges for substitute teachers because they have less guidance and more responsibility. Below, we've highlighted the highest leverage areas of focus and offered some advice for your best short-term strategy. In all three of these areas there is **ambiguity** about who is responsible for the work, which means that despite positive intentions, it can feel like an extra burden to staff or fall through the cracks.

Planning & Class Set-Up

It is unclear who is responsible for creating plans for long-term subs. This gap is amplified for start-of-year vacancies where there is no established routine for students, the classroom needs to be set up, and lesson plans need to be written.

- **District Leaders:** Set guidelines and give principals the ability to pay subs and teachers for time to plan and prepare for the school year. *Also, share the toolkit with your sub office staff.*
- **Principals:** In the short term, focus on what you can do to welcome subs to your school. *The attached toolkit includes a welcome plan and classroom walkthrough.*

Sub Preparation and Support

As a sector, we put tremendous thought and resources into preparing and supporting new teachers. But subs, in the exact same assignment, get virtually no support. The vast majority of school districts do not offer substitute teachers meaningful training or ongoing PD.

- **District Leaders:** In the short-term, your best strategy is to find willing mentors (veteran teachers, instructional leaders at the central office, recent retirees, or teachers with similar assignments at the school) and stipend them to provide support and advice during the first two months of school. *The toolkit includes basic guidance for mentors.*
- **Principals:** Create time for the long-term sub to collaborate with veteran teachers in similar teaching assignments.

Proactive and Positive Communication with Families

We tend to talk about substitute teachers in transactional terms, aka a “warm body” motivated by a paycheck. This dehumanizing framing makes the substitute teacher’s job harder and reinforces the anxiety that families are already feeling. It’s also very common that teams are so focused on last-minute efforts to recruit a permanent teacher that they don’t proactively communicate with families.

- **District Leaders:** Explicitly ask teams to pause on recruitment to craft a communication plan. Be mindful of how you are talking about subs and share the stories of individual subs who will be starting the year with your students.
- **Principals:** Don’t let families be surprised on the first day of school. Introduce the substitute teacher beforehand so that students know what to expect. *The toolkit includes a template email for introductions to families and your school team.*

Long-Term Assignment Prep Toolkit

HR Leaders: This planning tool is designed to help ensure that substitute teachers in long-term assignments are set up for success. To use the planning tool, long-term subs will need at least 2 hours of paid time to prepare for their assignment. We recommend providing this to principals when a long-term assignment is identified and walking through it together.

Assignment Overview- HR COMPLETES

Grade/Subject		Teacher	
Anticipated Dates		Schedule	

Substitute Teacher Contact Info- HR COMPLETES

Name		Email	
Phone		Text OK?	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No
Quick Bio Sub Bio Template	NAME has been a substitute teacher for ___1___ years. NAME's graduated from University or High School and has worked as a ___2___. ___3___ are some of NAME's favorite hobbies outside of school. Her/his/their favorite book is ___4___. NAME is looking forward to ___5___ as a substitute teacher this year. ADD FROM 6 HERE		

Next Steps and Resources

	Activity	Principal / AP Role	Resource
1	Planning Meeting	Schedule and host Zoom meeting	Suggested Agenda
2	Assignment Details	Complete before planning meeting	Planning Template
3	Shadow Day or Classroom Setup	Schedule visit to classroom or classroom setup walkthrough	Sub Reflection Worksheet Classroom Setup Checklist
4	Introductions	Send to students, families, and staff prior to sub starting	Email Template Sub Bio Template
5	Identify Mentor	If it's possible in your district, identify a veteran teacher willing to serve as an informal mentor.	Guidance for Mentors of Long-Term Sub
5	Request Technology Accounts	(Add details for your district)	

Suggested Planning Meeting Agenda (45 minutes)

Attendees: Principal, incoming substitute teacher, regular classroom teacher (if appropriate)

Time	Topic
10 min	Introductions & Sub Quick Bio
10 min	Review Agenda Items <ul style="list-style-type: none"><input type="checkbox"/> Assignment Details<input type="checkbox"/> Welcome Plan<input type="checkbox"/> Daily Schedule<input type="checkbox"/> Contact Info<input type="checkbox"/> School Communications<input type="checkbox"/> Other Essential Information
15 min	Instructional Plan (you may need an additional meeting on this) <ol style="list-style-type: none">Getting Oriented<ol style="list-style-type: none">What is important to know about this class?How will the sub learn about the curriculum?For mid-year assignments: What's the current routine for this classroom?Looking Ahead:<ol style="list-style-type: none">Who will prepare the lesson plans for this class(es)?If the sub needs assistance with planning, who will help?Does the sub have everything they need in order to assign and assess student work?
10 min	Get Clear on Next Steps: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><input type="checkbox"/> Shadow Day or Classroom Setup Walkthrough Date & Time<input type="checkbox"/> Intro to Students<input type="checkbox"/> Intro to Families<input type="checkbox"/> Other Follow-up or Next Steps

Sub Assignment Details

Complete the worksheet below, and share electronically in advance of the meeting.

Substitute Name			
Grade/Subject		Teacher	
Anticipated Dates		Schedule	

School Contact Info

Principal Name		Principal Email	
Principal Phone		Text OK?	
Office Name		Office Email	
Office Phone		Text OK?	

Welcome Plan

Suggested steps to integrate the long-term sub into your school community. For brand new substitute teachers, it might be helpful to also share Substantial's free [Welcome to Substitute Teaching](#) online course, found at [SubSchool.org](#)

Topic	Select Plan / Add Details
Intro to Students	Choose Your Plan: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><input type="checkbox"/> During shadow day with regular teacher<input type="checkbox"/> By principal or other member of staff<input type="checkbox"/> By substitute teacher on first day of assignment (not recommended)
Intro to Families Use the sub quick bio	Choose Your Plan: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><input type="checkbox"/> Via email from principal<input type="checkbox"/> Via email from regular teacher<input type="checkbox"/> Via email from substitute<input type="checkbox"/> Family meeting - sub join?
Shadow Day or Classroom Setup Walkthrough Shadow Day Reflection Worksheet Classroom Setup Checklist	Choose Your Plan: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><input type="checkbox"/> Shadow Day (for mid-year assignments)<ul style="list-style-type: none"><input type="checkbox"/> With regular teacher<input type="checkbox"/> With other teacher in similar grade/subject<input type="checkbox"/> Classroom Setup Walkthrough (for start-of-year vacancies) Scheduled for:

Staff Email / Communications	<p>Has the sub been added to all-school communication lists?</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Yes</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> No</p> <p>What does the substitute need to know?</p>
Staff Meetings, PD, Traditions	<p>Are subs invited to attend staff meetings and PD?</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Yes</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> No</p> <p>What does the substitute need to know?</p>

Essential Information to Provide

Information
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Weekly Class Schedule <input type="checkbox"/> Class Roster <input type="checkbox"/> Student Needs - 504s, , IEPs, special service & circumstances, etc. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> For IEPs and 504 plans, connect w/special education teacher to review <input type="checkbox"/> Login Information / Computer <input type="checkbox"/> Materials Needed for Instruction - books, smartboard, teacher's manuals, etc. <input type="checkbox"/> Materials Students Have - workbooks, school supplies, manipulatives, etc. <input type="checkbox"/> Campus Info - parking, where to store personal items, lunch room, adult bathrooms <input type="checkbox"/> Staff Roster <input type="checkbox"/> Technology Training Availability (add for your district)

Sub Responsibilities

(Check all that apply to this assignment, add items as needed)

Day-to-Day	Interaction with Students & Families
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Track & submit attendance <input type="checkbox"/> Lead class call(s) <input type="checkbox"/> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Answer student questions <input type="checkbox"/> Answer family questions - phone messages and email <input type="checkbox"/> Weekly newsletter <input type="checkbox"/>
Planning	Assessment & Grading
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Create assignments on _____ <input type="checkbox"/> Create weekly instructional plan (scope + sequence) <input type="checkbox"/> Adapt weekly instructional plan <input type="checkbox"/> Join weekly teacher collaboration <input type="checkbox"/> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Assign points to assignments <input type="checkbox"/> Give feedback on assignments <input type="checkbox"/> Prepare grades or report cards <input type="checkbox"/>

Shadow Reflection Worksheet

A tool for subs to reflect on what you see & what you learn

Pre-Shadow: Questions Going In

What questions do you have about how this classroom works and what this group of students is like?

During Shadow: What Did You Observe?

Activity + Time	What did the teacher do?	What did the students do?

After: What Did You Take Away?

What techniques do you want to try as a sub? What advice would you give yourself when you are in your first few days of subbing?

Classroom Setup Walkthrough

A planning tool to be used by principal and long-term sub during a joint walkthrough of the classroom, ideally before school starts.

Physical Set-Up

Key Questions

1. After your first walkthrough, what is missing? What's the plan and timeline for addressing these needs?
2. Can the substitute teacher make changes to the room to make it more welcoming? What's okay to change?
3. Can the substitute teacher add art or decorations? Are there supplies available such as materials to make bulletin boards?

Checklist

This is a starting list, add more as needed

- ☐ Locate chairs and desks for all students
- ☐ Check cleanliness
- ☐ Locate emergency procedures and supplies
- ☐ Practice closing and locking the door
- ☐ Practice turning on and using the classroom technology
- ☐ Locate student work materials and work areas

Instructional Materials

Key Questions

1. After your first walkthrough, what is missing? What's the plan and timeline for addressing these needs?
2. What instructional materials should be in this classroom?
3. What are the best read aloud books for this grade level? Does this classroom have copies of those books?
4. Are art supplies available?
5. If the sub needs to duplicate worksheets or other instructional materials, how does that work?

Checklist

This is a starting list, add more as needed

- ☐ Complete set of instructional materials - such as textbooks - for students
- ☐ Teacher guide for each textbook or curriculum in use at this grade level or subject area
- ☐ Classroom library with books at a variety of reading levels
- ☐ Basic classroom supplies are available:
 - ☐ Paper
 - ☐ Pencil
 - ☐ Pencil sharpener
 - ☐ Whiteboard markers (if applicable)
 - ☐ Kleenex
 - ☐ Disinfecting wipes

Introduction Email Templates

Mid-year Leaves and Vacancies

Families

Dear Families,

I would like to introduce you to **SUB NAME** who will be joining us as a long-term sub in your student's class. **Ms./Mr. XXX (add in a brief background on them).**

I hope you will join me in welcoming **SUB NAME** to our school community. It will take some time for you and your child to get to know your new teacher. Please know that I am working hard to support **SUB NAME** and to make this transition as smooth as possible. If you have questions or concerns don't hesitate to reach out to me.

Thank you!

Sincerely,

Staff

Dear Team,

I would like to introduce you to **SUB NAME** who will be joining us as a long-term sub in **GRADE OR SUBJECT**. **Ms./Mr. XXX (add in a brief background on them).**

Join me in welcoming **SUB NAME** to our school community. Please be sure to stop by **their classroom** to introduce yourself and to provide support in any way. We are excited to have **SUB NAME** working with us on behalf of our students and families. **SUB NAME's** district email has been activated and he/she can be reached at **(enter email)**.

Thank you!

Sincerely,

Guidance for Mentors of Long-Term Subs

How It Works

As a mentor, your job is to provide informal support and practical advice. Best practice suggests mentors meet with substitute teachers at least once a week, preferably before or after school. Remember you aren't evaluating performance or reporting back to an administrator, you are an added support to your colleague.

What to Focus On

Teachers have different styles when it comes to classroom management and leading instruction and learning. Long-term subs typically have very little experience or training in how to set up a classroom, navigate the curriculum, write a lesson plan, and assess student learning.

The most effective things you can do are:

1. Show genuine interest and enthusiasm for their work. Engage in authentic listening.
2. Share your lesson planning strategies, including examples of what has and has not worked for you.
3. Give them a tour of your classroom and highlight "must-have areas," organizational structures, and routines.
4. Let long-term subs know the best times to ask you questions and the best way to reach you (text, email, call, etc.).

Here are some topics you might explore together:

Classroom Organization

- ☐ Student materials
- ☐ Elements of teacher space (or desk)

Accessing the Curriculum

- ☐ Pacing guides
- ☐ Web resources
- ☐ How much do you cover?

Writing a Lesson Plan

- ☐ Provide lesson plan examples for the sub to use or emulate

Assessment

- ☐ Review and offer feedback
- ☐ Checking for understanding

School Environment

- ☐ What to pay attention to outside of your classroom
- ☐ When to step in to correct student behavior (and when to give your colleagues space)

Interacting with Parents

- ☐ Talk through challenges and give tips

Substitute Teacher Quick Bio Template

Thanks for accepting a long-term assignment! We'd like to introduce you to the school community. Please complete this quick form so that we can share a little more about you. What you share is completely up to you, feel free to skip any of these questions.

About You		
1	How long have you been a substitute teacher?	
2	What education, experiences, or past work have helped prepare you for substitute teaching?	
3	Do you have any hobbies outside of substitute teaching that you'd like to share?	
4	What's your favorite children's book?	
5	What are you looking forward to as a substitute teacher this year?	
6	What else would you like the students and families to know about you?	

Example Bio Paragraph

NAME has been a substitute teacher for ___1___ years. NAME's graduated from University or High school and has worked as a ___2___. ___3___ are some of NAME's favorite hobbies outside of school. Her/his/their favorite book is ___4___. NAME is looking forward to ___5___ as a substitute teacher this year. ADD FROM 6 HERE