

Preparation, not Panic: When a Teacher Is Absent

Planning for Substitute Teachers

By Lisa J. Goldstein

It's Sunday morning. I arrive at my office at 7:15 AM, only to see the one thing I hate more than anything else on a Sunday morning—the red message light on my phone is blinking! I listen to the message, and sure enough, one of my teachers has the flu and cannot come in to teach.

We've all been there—a teacher who wakes up sick, no lesson plan, a substitute list that is all too short, a swarm of teachers and parents needing our attention right at the moment the substitute arrives, and so on.

Being prepared for the inevitable surely benefits everyone, including the substitute, the students, the teacher, and the educator. Here are several ways to turn the last minute “crisis” into a positive experience for all involved.

1. Maintain an up-to-date substitute list.

This may seem obvious, but it can be hard, especially if you live in an area where good religious school teachers are in short supply. Build up your substitute list in the following ways:

- Sign up former teachers who no longer wish to make a regular commitment but who would like to stay connected to the school.
- Never pass up an opportunity to interview a prospective teacher. If you have no openings or feel someone isn't quite right for a position, ask if they wish to be called as a substitute.
- Network with other educators in your area, if applicable. Share names of teachers who teach on opposite days who might be willing to sub now and then.
- Find out which of your congregants or your students' parents are teachers or former teachers and enlist them.
- Post a notice at your local university Hillel or student union.
- Post a notice at your local JCC.
- Ask your teachers for referrals. I've found some of my best subs and teachers this way!

Rather than having teachers arrange for their own substitutes, try to obtain substitutes yourself. This way, you will be able to maintain “quality control,” make sure that you hire the substitutes that are best suited for the class in question, and the substitutes will not be inundated with calls from two, three or more teachers who are all going to be out on the same day!

2. Prepare administratively.

Maintain a substitute folder for each teacher. In the folder should be:

- ✓ General information, including substitute responsibilities and school policies and procedures
- ✓ Specialist programs schedule (art, music, library, computers)
- ✓ Substitute teacher feedback form
- ✓ Emergency instructions, including building evacuation plan
- ✓ Map of school, including classroom numbers

- ✓ Class roster and seating chart, if applicable
- ✓ Note from the teacher that includes his or her routine procedures, and any other information that may be helpful (students who should not sit together, students with special needs, etc.)

The substitute folder, attendance form, tzedakah envelope, and lesson plan should be waiting on the counter in case you are not available when the sub arrives.

3. Prepare strong, ready-to-use instructional material.

Set up a notebook with a separate sheet for each month. When a teacher knows that he or she will need to be out on a specific day, the teacher should sign the book as far in advance as possible, allowing you to get the best substitute for that class. Ideally, the teacher should provide a detailed lesson plan, including pages to cover in the textbook, along with any photocopies, books, videos, or other materials that will be needed.

Sometimes, however, the teacher can barely make the phone call, let alone dictate or e-mail a lesson plan. Rather than sending a substitute into the classroom without a lesson plan, consider taking the following steps:

At the beginning of the year—well before flu season hits—ask each teacher to prepare an emergency lesson plan. The content should connect in some way to an aspect of the class's curriculum, yet the lesson should be able to stand on its own; it should not be part of a sequence of lessons. Again, the teacher should include any photocopies, videos, books or other materials needed. Keep the emergency plans and related materials in the school office so that you or your assistant always know where they are.

Some examples of an emergency plan might include:

- ✓ Holding a scavenger hunt around the building, looking for specific words, objects and what they are used for, and the synagogue staff and what they do (2nd grade Synagogue unit).
- ✓ Creating a Jewish ceremony to celebrate receiving one's driver's license (6th grade Life Cycle unit).
- ✓ Teaching Hebrew words for hand, foot, right, left, blue, red, yellow and green, and playing Hebrew Twister (first year Hebrew).
- ✓ Examining Sim Shalom, Shalom Rav, and Oseh Shalom, including translations and key Hebrew words from each, discussing what peace means to each student personally, and writing an original prayer for peace using some Hebrew (Gimel level Hebrew).
- ✓ Reading several letters from the Bintel Brief and discussing what we learn from them about the immigrant experience (7th grade American Jewish History).

The actual lesson plans should be far more detailed, but this gives you an idea of how to tie an isolated lesson to a core curriculum. They typically end up being quite engaging. In fact, you're likely to find that most teachers will use their emergency lesson toward the end of the school year if they have not needed it until then.

On the rare occasion that you cannot get a substitute:

- Ask one of your specialists to teach the class instead of the “special” for that day (that means that other teachers have to be flexible to accommodate a change in the schedule).
- Ask a parent to sit in the class to provide adult supervision and have an experienced *madrich* or *madrichah* teach the class. Many 3rd - or 4th-year *madrichim* are quite capable, and they have the added advantage of knowing what the class is working on. When you do this, make sure to check in on the class several times over the course of the session.
- Teach the class yourself. Personally, when I am not tied up with a family workshop or other commitment, I love to fill in for an absent teacher for several reasons: it allows me to build a relationship with the students while ascertaining their skill level, it allows the students to see me in the role of teacher, and it tells the parents that their children are always my first priority.
- Combine two classes. Since this is difficult for the teacher, especially when you have only one class per grade, and it is disruptive to both classes and their flow of learning, consider combining classes as a last resort.

We cannot avoid the blinking red message light. However, with advance preparation, we can minimize the panic we feel upon seeing it, and make the substitute experience a positive one for all concerned.

Lisa J. Goldstein, R.J.E. is Director of Life Long Learning at Congregation Emanu-El B'ne Jeshurun, Milwaukee, WI.



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