



A Sporting Chance

Substitute teachers should approach PE as an exciting new experience

By Jayne D. Greenberg and Judy L. LoBianco

School personnel charged with locating substitute teachers often have a difficult time finding people to provide class coverage. Finding substitutes for physical education (PE) can be even more difficult, since many teachers feel they are ill-prepared to manage large classes in a gym or field setting.

Substitute teachers, however, should be prepared for any assignment they accept. And with guidance and support from the host school, substituting in a PE class can be a fun and exciting opportunity. Below are recommendations to ensure that a substitute teacher has a positive experience when teaching PE.

Stick to the Plan

Whether a teacher is a regular substitute or new to the school, he or she should arrive at the school no later than 20 minutes prior to the start of the school day. This allows the substitute teacher to check in, meet with the principal or assistant principal to discuss the day's duties, and get a class schedule, instructional materials, and any keys needed.

The substitute teacher should review class procedures, attendance policies, lesson plans and alternate assignments, and the teacher's schedule. Staff PE teachers should supply a folder containing all of the information necessary to conduct classes.

A substitute teacher folder should be updated regularly and include:

- At least five days' worth of PE lesson plans in case the teacher is out for an extended period;
- A class schedule indicating which periods instruction is delivered, what grade levels are in each class, the length of the class, and when the teacher's lunch is scheduled;
- Attendance policies dictating how student attendance is taken and recorded, with information on any "pass" system in place governing temporary leave;
- A bell schedule indicating class start and end times, and guidelines on when students

should be dismissed to change into street clothes and get to their next classes;

- A map of the school layout, including evacuation routes for emergencies; and
- The name of a faculty member or an administrator to whom the substitute teacher can turn for assistance.


The substitute teacher should wear a warm-up suit, shorts and a polo shirt, or other comfortable, professional activewear. He or she will be standing most of the day and should wear footwear appropriate to a field, court, or gymnasium setting. It's also a good idea to wear a watch, since there might be no clocks on the playing field.

Since substitute teachers can't be expected to provide the same level of instruction as certified PE teachers, lesson plans should focus on age- and developmentally appropriate activities that can be delivered easily throughout the day. Free play is discouraged, since it often requires additional supervision and could cause disciplinary problems.

Exercise Control

Substitute teachers should follow the lesson plan provided to keep students actively engaged at all times. Supervision and student safety are of utmost importance, since students aren't neatly seated in a classroom. The substitute teacher must maintain discipline and control to complete the assignment with confidence.

At the conclusion of the school day, the substitute teacher should ensure students are dismissed in a timely manner so that they don't miss their bus or ride home, leave a recap report for the teacher, and check with school administrators to see if he or she is needed the following day.

Substitute teaching in PE offers an opportunity to engage with students in physical activities in ways that no other subject area does. Teachers should embrace this new challenge and have fun! If they can have fun, the students will as well. 

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