



## In Praise of Substitute Teachers

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### Abstract

*Poor pay and little recognition, that is the lot of high school substitute teachers in Silicon Valley. Having walked in their shoes for more than a year, I can attest to their plight. They deserve better. Districts employ two types of substitutes: on-call for daily assignments and temporary teachers for a specific duration. My adventure as an on-call substitute began four years ago. I returned to education following a thirty-year hiatus as a Silicon Valley Real Estate Broker. Prior to my real estate experience, I held a variety of different positions in education: High School English and History Teacher, Supervisor of University Intern-Teachers, Vice Principal, Principal, Director of Human Resources, Assistant Superintendent, Superintendent, and Assistant Professor of Educational Leadership.*

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Poor pay and little recognition, that is the lot of high school substitute teachers in Silicon Valley. Having walked in their shoes for more than a year, I can attest to their plight. They deserve better. Districts employ two types of substitutes: on-call for daily assignments and temporary teachers for a specific duration. My adventure as an on-call substitute began four years ago. I returned to education following a thirty-year hiatus as a Silicon Valley Real Estate Broker. Prior to my real estate experience, I held a variety of different positions in education: High School English and History Teacher, Supervisor of University Intern-Teachers, Vice Principal, Principal, Director of Human Resources, Assistant Superintendent, Superintendent, and Assistant Professor of Educational Leadership.

One may ask, why did I leave education? As my educational career progressed, I found myself spending more time acting as a politician instead of a student advocate. Although all jobs have a political dimension, the job of a public-school administrator places one in an arena of competing interests. Teachers, parents, school board members, social advocates and employee organizations frequently have different priorities, apart from student learning. Consequently, I found my primary role as a student advocate receding as I attempted to manage competing forces. At the same time, friends were encouraging me to switch careers and become a real estate broker. Upon reflection and heeding their suggestion, I left education to become a real estate broker, where I remained until 2015.

After years of helping sellers and buyers achieve their real estate objectives, I began to tire of real estate and the pressure to monetize my relationships. I needed a new challenge. Coincidentally, while talking with a friend at the gym, I discovered that he was working as a substitute teacher and found it a rewarding experience. That discussion piqued my interest and I began to reflect on my previous teaching experiences. Wondering how education had changed, I decided to find out

My adventure began. First, I needed to produce either an appropriate credential or a 30-Day Substitute Teaching Permit from the County Office of Education. Most districts also require verification that applicants received a satisfactory score on the California Basic Educational Skills Test. Since I hold a lifetime credential in secondary education, I met the credential requirement.

Next, I registered with four Silicon Valley high school districts (fourteen schools) and began the employment process. TB tests and fingerprints for each district and on-line courses covering a variety of topics were required: "Bloodborne Pathogens," "Bullying: Recognition and Response," "Mandated Reporter: Child Abuse and Neglect," "New Hire Orientation Video," and "Protect California Children, Sexual Harassment." Applicants must also produce a certificate verifying that they have completed the required courses. Of course, additional courses have been added since my arrival. For example, a protocol for intruders on campus and district lock-down procedures may have been added.

What are substitutes paid In Silicon Valley? Substitutes are paid between \$165.00 and 180.00 for all day assignments. Additionally, some districts pay their retired teachers \$250.00 a day for substitute work. This is premium pay which has been negotiated by the teacher's bargaining unit. Most substitute salaries have remained flat since 2016. Today, a car wash employee will make \$136.00 on their first day of employment, including a \$250.00 signing bonus. A first-year teacher in 2018 with a BA and 45 graduate units in one of the highest paying high school districts in Silicon Valley earns \$73,783.00 a year where the median price of a home is \$1,000,000.00. Assuming a work year of 181 days a year, the daily rate of pay is \$407.64.

Once the employment process is completed, how does a substitute secure an assignment? For the most part, substitutes are alerted to assignments as they are posted online by classroom teachers. Generally, the first substitute to respond is given the assignment. My day as a substitute teacher began at 5:15 am, reviewing my mobile phone alert system for jobs. There were usually between ten and twenty assignments. When I found an assignment which looked promising, I would hit the acceptance button. Unfortunately, many times I would accept and then receive notification that the assignment was taken. My usual departure time from home was 6:45 am unless I anticipated heavier traffic. Many schools in Santa Clara County do not provide students bus transportation; therefore, arrival and departure times at school sites are congested periods caused by parents transporting their children to school.

Arriving at school, I had to find the staff parking lot, which is usually separate from the students. After finding the administrative offices, I was usually greeted by a friendly office staff person who asked me to start a time sheet. Next, I would receive room keys, a visitor's badge, and a substitute folder which included lesson plans, a bell schedule, and emergency protocols and a school map. When asked if I knew where the classroom(s) was located, I asked that the staff person circle my destination. That sounds easy, but sometimes it is not, particularly if the campus is under renovation. Finding classroom buildings would be easier if they were identified with big letters painted on the exterior.

Arriving at my classroom, I usually had fifteen to twenty minutes to prepare for the arrival of my students. High school classrooms differ significantly in their age and condition. Classroom resources must also be found. Sometimes there is not enough clean space on the white board to write my name because many teachers have covered the white boards with posters or displays of student work. Today most high school teachers rely on PowerPoint Presentations, document readers, and overhead projectors to replace extemporaneously produced teacher notes on the white board. Of course, some classes have Smart Boards as well. A Smart Board is an interactive whiteboard which is

connected to a computer and a projector. Schools which have not issued Chromebooks or laptops to all students rely on carts to hold enough laptops for an entire class. Unfortunately, teachers may be required to share a cart with a colleague and scheduling issues may result. Although most districts provide a desktop or laptop computer for the regular teacher, sometimes a substitute may have difficulty logging in to report attendance

Surprisingly, my classroom management skills quickly returned, and I was able to establish rapport with my students; however, I experienced some confusion with methods of instruction, the curriculum, and the length of the instructional period. Today's curriculum and methods of instruction are more prescribed than in the past in order to conform to the national movement for a common core curriculum. Classroom periods may vary in length from fifty to ninety minutes and some classes may meet every other day.

Despite my adjustment to current curriculum and methods of instruction, I immediately enjoyed the interaction with my students. My daily routine was simple. First, review the teacher's lesson plan. To my pleasant surprise, only twice during the year was I without a lesson plan and forced to improvise.

Following a review of the lesson plan, I checked to make sure that the teacher's computer was working so that I could take roll; however, some districts just ask substitutes to take attendance the old fashion way, mark an attendance sheet. Then I would give the class its assignment and proceed to move about the room ensuring that students were using their chrome books or laptops appropriately. If given the opportunity, some students will deviate from the lesson and engage in on-line social activities: reviewing emails, viewing Pinterest, or other digital platforms. In short, they are doing everything but the assignment. Of course, a substitute's main job is to keep them on task.

What is the major social dynamic which confronts a substitute upon first meeting their class? The substitute is reading the class and the class is reading the substitute. Some students try to assess the substitute's level of subject matter competence and ability to manage the class. Of course, the substitute is also making an assessment. Which students appear ready to challenge my subject matter competency or my ability to manage the class? Although all teachers face the same issues, there are additional variables for a substitute. The first variable is that students know that a substitute teacher is temporary and will probably be gone tomorrow. For some students, this is an opportunity to goof-off and impress their peers with their entertainment skills. The second variable is administrative support.

Most substitute are unknown to the administration. If the substitute has difficulty with a student(s) and requests assistance from the office, the substitute may be dropped from the school's substitute list; therefore, in most situations the substitute will attempt to manage the class without assistance from the administration.

Today, most high schools have a school-wide effort to reduce student stress. Both regular teachers and substitute teachers struggle to meet this challenge. Students are told that in order to be a successful adult they must graduate from college; therefore, their next step is to gain admission to college or a university. Students must have the appropriate grades and acceptable SAT scores to qualify for admission. To motivate students to be successful in their quest, teachers hang degrees and college pennants in their classroom and wear their college sweatshirts on designated days. As students' progress from one grade level to another, the pressure for academic success intensifies. Capitalizing on this phenomenon, tutorial centers are found in most neighborhood strip centers, many national franchises.

Additionally, the adolescent drive for peer acceptance increases in high school. Of course, this is not a new phenomenon for high school students; however, it has become a more complex issue with the pervasiveness of social media. Today, the tentacles of social media are at their fingertips 24/7, enabling peers to promote glorified experiences to make their friends envious while mean-spirited bullies troll their peers to inflict pain. Both are contributors to student stress and anxiety. Adults also know this pain.

To help students manage their stress, many schools administer a mental health survey to identify potential problems. Some also issue a resource card to all students which provides 24-hour support contacts for many issues teenagers are coping with, including suicidal thoughts.

During my assignments, I aided numerous students who were coping with stress related issues. While substituting in an American History class, I noticed that a student had written something on a piece of paper next to his seat. On my second pass by his seat the writing was clearly legible, "I want to die." Concerned, I asked the student to step outside with me. I asked him if he really felt that way, and he responded "yes." After class, I sent an email to his regular teacher describing my experience, but unfortunately, he never responded. Having received no communication from the teacher, I contacted the principal's administrative assistant and she assured me that the boy would be seen by his school psychologist the next day and he was. Fortunately, the psychologist was aware of the boy's condition. Next, while substituting in an English class, a student complained to me that he could not read the text because the print was too small, and he became agitated. Following further questioning, he told me that he had recently transferred from Boston where he received special assistance for his condition. I told him I would seek assistance for him, and I did.

Once while walking between buildings, I encountered a girl lying on the ground and noticed she was having difficulty breathing. Surmising that she was hyperventilating, I dispatched a student, who was watching, to the office to secure assistance while I remained with the girl. Teachers and substitutes experience these challenges daily.

Who are the substitute teachers? They are student teachers, retired teachers, people considering a career change, firefighters earning extra money on their day off, and retired people from other jobs supplementing their incomes. For many, substituting is their only source of income.

Why should substitute teachers be praised? They enable schools to remain open when teachers are ill, on leave, or participating in professional development. They also assume the legal responsibilities of a regular teacher by acting in loco parentis, which means they assume the responsibilities of a parent. Except for lesson planning, grading student work and interacting with parents, substitutes face the same challenges as regular teachers. Despite their responsibilities, substitutes are poorly paid and receive little recognition. Undervalued, by many regular teachers, a substitute is considered a glorified babysitter. Many regular teachers do not realize that most substitutes have the same commitment to student learning.

My substitute experience gave me an opportunity to re-engage with teenagers, and to rediscover my passion for teaching and learning. After a year of substituting, I wanted my own classes. Since then, I have accepted only semester or summer assignments in English or history. In addition to my high school assignments, I also teach at San Jose State University as a Lecturer and Supervisor of Secondary Education Student Teachers. I continue to praise substitute teachers for their contribution to our public schools.

**REFERENCE**

**Biography**

**Ralph Y. McKay**

I have held numerous positions in California school districts and Universities: five years as a High School English/History Teacher and Coordinator of Advanced Placement Programs in the Mountain View-Los Altos High School District, Mountain View, CA; fourteen years in the Franklin-McKinley School District, San Jose, CA. serving as a History Teacher, Vice Principal, Principal, Director of Human Resources, Assistant Superintendent, and Superintendent; two years as a Supervisor of Intern-Teachers, University of the Pacific, Stockton, CA; and two years as an Assistant Professor of Educational Leadership at San Jose State University. Currently, I am a Lecturer and Supervisor of Secondary Student Teachers at San Jose State University.

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