



# The School-Wide Learning Commons

## Substitute Teacher Basics

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### Substitute Teacher Basics

Before reading this idea, get the following information:

- Amount spent on your school or district on substitute teachers.
  - Do not count long term subs since they must take over the prescribed curriculum
- An estimate of how many days a typical class would experience a substitute teacher
- Any evidence you already have about the impact of substitute teachers on carrying out the prescribed curriculum assigned to them at the beginning of their day.

Recently, a regular substitute teacher in a large suburban school district , related the following experience. “ I usually get about 20 min. To look over the teaching plans left by the teacher so I can hit the ground running. One day, I said to a student, frittering away his time and asked him why he was not doing his assigned work. His response was: ‘Lady, I don’t do any work for my teacher! What makes you think I would do any work for you?’” Such a response might be followed by an equally smart response: “And, young man, what makes me think you are a better person than that?

This same substitute teacher with lots of experience tells me that she refuses to teach in some school districts in the area because the students are disrespectful and incorrigible with the hour or day being nothing but chaos and attempted discipline.

Now answer a few more questions about programs in your school:

- Is self-directed learning a school value?
- Is project-based learning a part of your school curriculum?
- What about Design Thinking projects. Are they happening?
- Genius hour?

If you answered in the affirmative to any or several of the questions above, what if you changed the title of substitute teacher to Project Mentor? Suppose the role of the mentor was to

encourage every student in the class to embark on self-directed learning time during their minutes together? A suggested protocol might stimulate conversation.

In a school where PBL/ design thinking is commonplace, the students keep logs of their own progress on individual projects, small group projects, and class projects underway. The log is updated via a Google Form, a print notebook, or on periodical reports to the classroom teacher and any specialists involved.

The Project Mentor entered the class and for the first five minutes, pulls from her repertoire a short story, an inspirational quick narrative, or a humorous piece and does a read aloud to calm the troops while they get out their logs and get settled as individuals or small groupings. The mentor then interacts over the time available discussing, providing tips, connecting the students to the resources of the learning commons and then in the final few min. Of the period, have students write in their logs what they did and their thoughts on what's next.

Classroom teachers who do PBL projects will often have work days already, so a project mentor day will come as no surprise and even welcomed as a time to get things done and collaborate. Visits to the central learning commons physical space might be a part of this activity for the entire class or small groups as well as using all the various tools on the virtual learning commons to make progress.

The challenge of this scenario, of course, is to develop the mentor and the mentored sessions in such a way that they advance both the objectives of the classroom teacher and any of the partners from the learning commons cadre. One also wonders about spreading this idea to snow days. If the students have access to the Internet and devices at home, the Virtual Learning Commons can actually be the driving hub of a day away because of weather or some other problem.

I asked my friend substitute teacher about this idea. Her analysis: "The kids would *love* it! And, one wonders how it would be received by those incredible groups discussed previously.

## **Assessment**

It is the logging that is going to provide evidence that the learner is starting to or keeping up command over their time that is going to provide the needed evidence. That coupled with a quick Google Form survey can be enough to get started. Ask the substitute teacher to provide stories of the mentoring done for both individuals and small groups.