CAREER KIT

Substitute Teacher Career Kit: 90-Day Action Plan

How to Become a Substitute Teacher

2026-10 edition

Inside: at-a-glance summary · step-by-step path · costs & requirements · 90-day action plan · documents checklist · exams · interview questions · resume bullets · common mistakes · 13-week tracker · resources

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SECTION 1

At a glance

There is no national rule for substitute teachers: each state, and often each school district, sets its own requirements. Depending on where you live, you may need anything from a high school diploma and a short training course to a bachelor's degree and a state substitute permit, plus a fingerprint background check almost everywhere. In many places you can go from application to your first assignment in 2–8 weeks.

Timeline	2–8 weeks in most districts (longer if you need college credits first)
Typical cost	$0–$300 (background check, permit, and training fees; some districts pay them)
Education	Varies by state: high school diploma, some college credits, or a bachelor's degree
License	Varies by state: none, a district approval, or a state substitute permit or certificate
Median pay	$41,670 per year ($20.03 per hour), full-year equivalent
Job outlook	+2% (2025–35); BLS Employment Projections for short-term substitutes

SECTION 2

Step-by-step path

1. Find your state's and district's exact requirements

Time: 1–3 days

This is the step that matters most, because rules differ widely. Some states issue a substitute permit or certificate through the state education agency; others leave it to each district. Examples: California's Emergency 30-Day Substitute Teaching Permit requires a bachelor's degree, while Missouri's Content Substitute certificate accepts either 36 semester hours of college credit or 20 clock hours of department-approved substitute training. Check your state department of education site and the HR page of the districts where you want to work.

2. Meet the education minimum

Time: 1 day to several months · Cost: $0–$150 for an approved substitute training course, where accepted

If your state or district requires college credits or a degree you do not have yet, plan how to get them. If it accepts a high school diploma plus an approved training course, sign up for the course. Have official transcripts sent wherever they are required; this is often the slowest part of the process.

3. Complete the background check

Time: 1–4 weeks · Cost: $0–$100

Fingerprint-based criminal background checks are standard for anyone working in schools, and many states also check child abuse registries. You usually schedule fingerprinting through a state-approved vendor. Some states require new fingerprints if your last clearance is old; for example, Missouri requires a new check if your clearance is more than 12 months old.

4. Apply for a state substitute permit, if your state issues one

Time: 2–6 weeks for processing · Cost: $0–$100 (state processing fees vary)

In permit states you apply online to the state credentialing agency, pay a processing fee, and submit transcripts and fingerprints. Some permits limit how long you can cover one class. California's 30-day permit, for example, allows up to 30 days for any one teacher during the school year, or 20 days in a special education classroom, and is valid for one year.

5. Apply to districts or a staffing agency

Time: 1–4 weeks

Many districts hire substitutes directly. Others contract with education staffing companies that handle hiring, training, and payroll. Apply to several districts or agencies to get more assignments. Expect an application, a short interview, reference checks, and employment eligibility (I-9) paperwork.

6. Finish onboarding and training

Time: 1 day–1 week

Many districts or agencies require an orientation covering classroom management, school safety procedures, mandated reporting, and how their absence management system works. Some states require training as part of the permit. Take it seriously; it is the main preparation you will get before walking into a classroom.

7. Start accepting assignments

Time: Ongoing

Most districts post jobs in an online absence management system or app where you accept assignments by grade, subject, and school. Say yes often early on, arrive early, follow the lesson plan, and leave a clear note for the teacher. Schools request substitutes they like, which leads to more work and long-term assignments.

SECTION 3

Costs & requirements

Estimated costs (USD)

Item	Low	High	Note
Fingerprinting and background check	$0	$100	Typical range, varies by state/district; some districts pay it
State substitute permit or certificate fee	$0	$100	Typical range, varies by state; many states charge no state fee because districts approve subs
Approved substitute training course (where accepted instead of college credits)	$0	$150	Typical range, varies by provider/state; some districts and agencies provide it free
Official transcripts	$0	$50	Typical range per school
TB test or health screening (if required)	$0	$60	Typical range, varies by district
Total	**$0**	**$460**	

Requirements

Education	Varies by state and district. Some accept a high school diploma or GED (sometimes with a training course), some require a set number of college credits, and some require a bachelor's degree. There is no national standard.
State permit or certificate	Some states require a state-issued substitute permit or certificate; others let districts decide. For example, California requires a bachelor's degree for its Emergency 30-Day Substitute Teaching Permit, and Missouri issues a Content Substitute certificate based on 36 college semester hours or 20 clock hours of approved training.
Background check	Fingerprint-based criminal background checks are required in nearly all districts. Some offenses disqualify you.
Age	Usually at least 18; some districts set a higher minimum, especially for high school assignments. Check the district posting.
Training	Many districts and staffing agencies require a short orientation or substitute training before your first assignment.
Long-term substitutes	Covering one class for an extended period, such as a parental leave, often requires more: a bachelor's degree, a teaching license, or a different permit. Rules vary by state.
Skills	Classroom management, flexibility, following lesson plans, calm under pressure, and reliability with early-morning calls.

SECTION 4

90-Day Action Plan

Tick each box as you finish the task. Do the phases in order; it is fine if a phase takes a little longer.

Phase 1: Get approved

Days 1–30

Goal: Meet your state and district requirements and clear your background check.

- ☐ Find your state's substitute rules on the state department of education site
- ☐ List 3–5 target districts and read their substitute job pages
- ☐ Order official transcripts or enroll in an approved substitute training course
- ☐ Schedule fingerprinting and background check
- ☐ Apply for a state substitute permit if your state requires one
- ☐ Apply to districts directly and to one education staffing agency

Phase 2: Start working

Days 31–60

Goal: Complete onboarding and take your first assignments.

- ☐ Finish district or agency orientation and safety training
- ☐ Set up the absence management app and your availability
- ☐ Build a sub bag: activities, pencils, a timer, a seating chart template, and a notes form
- ☐ Accept assignments across several grades to find your best fit
- ☐ Arrive 20–30 minutes early and find the lesson plan, rosters, and emergency procedures
- ☐ Leave a clear end-of-day note for every teacher

Phase 3: Get requested and plan ahead

Days 61–90

Goal: Build a reputation that brings steady and long-term work.

- [ ] Introduce yourself to front-office staff and principals at schools you like
- [ ] Ask teachers you subbed for to request you again
- [ ] Track days worked and income to see which districts pay and book best
- [ ] Apply for long-term substitute assignments if you qualify
- [ ] Decide whether you want full-time teaching and research alternative certification
- [ ] Ask a principal or teacher for a reference letter

SECTION 5

Documents checklist

Gather these early. Keep originals in one folder and scans in the cloud.

- ☐ Government-issued photo ID
- ☐ High school diploma or GED
- ☐ Official college transcripts or degree (if required)
- ☐ Certificate of approved substitute training (if used instead of college credits)
- ☐ Fingerprint and background check clearance
- ☐ State substitute permit or certificate (if required)
- ☐ Employment eligibility documents for the I-9 form
- ☐ TB test or health screening (if required)
- ☐ Resume and two or three references
- ☐ Direct deposit and tax forms

SECTION 6

Interview questions

1. Why do you want to be a substitute teacher?

Tip: Be honest: flexibility, interest in teaching, or giving back. Show you take the responsibility seriously.

2. How would you handle a class that will not settle down?

Tip: Describe stating clear expectations, using the teacher's routines, and staying calm instead of yelling.

3. What would you do if there is no lesson plan?

Tip: Check with the office or a neighboring teacher, then use a prepared backup activity from your sub bag.

4. How would you handle a student who refuses to work?

Tip: Speak privately, offer a choice, document it, and inform the teacher in your note.

5. What would you do if a student told you they were being hurt at home?

Tip: Say you are a mandated reporter and would follow the school's reporting procedure right away.

6. How do you follow a teacher's lesson plan you disagree with?

Tip: You follow it; your job is to keep learning on track and leave feedback in your note.

7. What grades and subjects are you comfortable with?

Tip: Be open, but name where you are strongest; flexibility gets more assignments.

8. How would you handle a fire drill or lockdown?

Tip: Show you would find the emergency procedures and roster before class starts.

9. How do you handle students who try to test a substitute?

Tip: Learn names quickly, be friendly but firm, and stick to the class rules.

10. Have you worked with children before?

Tip: Mention coaching, tutoring, camps, child care, or parenting with specific examples.

11. How available are you?

Tip: Be specific about days and how early you can accept a call; reliability matters most.

SECTION 7

Resume bullet examples

Adapt these to what you actually did. Use numbers wherever you can.

- Completed state-approved substitute teacher training and fingerprint background clearance
- Covered 60+ assignments in K–12 classrooms across two school districts
- Followed teacher lesson plans and kept classes on schedule for up to 30 students
- Managed classroom behavior using each teacher's routines and expectations
- Left detailed end-of-day notes on lessons completed, absences, and behavior
- Requested back by teachers at three schools for repeat assignments
- Completed a three-week long-term assignment covering a 3rd-grade class

SECTION 8

Common mistakes to avoid

1. Relying on a general online checklist instead of your own state's and district's rules
2. Letting transcripts or fingerprinting delay your start by weeks
3. Applying to only one district and getting few assignments
4. Arriving late or without a backup plan for a missing lesson plan
5. Skipping the end-of-day note for the teacher
6. Expecting full-year income; work drops on holidays, testing days, and summer
7. Not asking about long-term substitute roles, which often pay more

SECTION 9

13-week progress tracker

Fill this in by hand each week.

Week	Focus	Done?	Notes
1			
2			
3			
4			
5			
6			
7			
8			
9			
10			
11			
12			
13			

SECTION 10

Resources, salary & disclaimer

Resources

- **BLS OEWS: Substitute Teachers, Short-Term**

https://data.bls.gov/oesprofile/?year=2025&major_group=250000&occupation=253031&measure=13&areas=STATE

- **California CTC: Substitute permits**

https://www.ctc.ca.gov/credentials/leaflets/cl-505p/

- **Missouri DESE: Substitute Teachers**

https://dese.mo.gov/educator-quality/certification/substitute-teachers

- **BLS: Kindergarten and Elementary School Teachers (next step)**

https://www.bls.gov/ooh/education-training-and-library/kindergarten-and-elementary-school-teachers.htm

Salary

Bottom 10%	Median	Top 10%
Less than $28,560	**$41,670 per year ($20.03 per hour), full-year equivalent**	More than $65,790

Outlook: BLS Employment Projections show employment of short-term substitute teachers growing 2% from 2025 to 2035, from about 556,100 to 567,000 jobs. OEWS counted about 524,770 short-term substitute jobs in May 2025, with a mean wage of $46,420. The OEWS annual figures are hourly wages multiplied by a full year of work; most substitutes work fewer days, so actual yearly earnings are usually lower. Most districts pay a daily rate set locally. BLS does not publish an Occupational Outlook Handbook profile for substitute teachers.

Source: BLS Occupational Employment and Wage Statistics (OEWS), Substitute Teachers, Short-Term (25-3031), May 2025 data; BLS Employment Projections 2025–35 — https://data.bls.gov/oesprofile/?year=2025&major_group=250000&occupation=253031&measure=13&areas=STATE

Disclaimer. Requirements vary by state and change over time. Verify with the official sources listed. This guide is not legal or career advice.