

Tips for Daily OTs:

By Tara Knarr

In my first years of working as a daily occasional teacher, I would sometimes walk out of a school at the end of the day with my head spinning. “Where did it all start going wrong?” I would ask myself as I thought over the day’s events. “Was it one particular student, the class dynamic – or was it me?”

Many occasional teachers on daily or short-term assignments ask themselves the same questions and share the same lingering uncertainty. For me, the uncertainty eventually led me to develop tactics to make the day better for myself and my students. Teaching is an amazing and rewarding occupation, but it wasn’t until I had a routine in place that I realized that a successful day started long before I met the students in the classroom. Here are some things I have learned.

Prepare the Night Before

Start preparing small things the night before to give yourself more time in the morning. I make sure that I have checked the weather, put my clothes out, and packed my lunch and my bag.

In my bag I always carry the necessary information for my job. ETFO makes it easy by providing occasional teachers with a calendar. It includes a school’s computer log-in, directory, and the names of administrators and office staff. It also has a space on each day to record your job information. Now that I have been using mine for a few years, I can’t imagine not having it with me. If your local or board does not provide this calendar, you can create your own. It is well worth the trouble.

Some other items I make sure to include: a whistle, my ID card, a refillable water bottle, and a supply teacher binder. The binder contains a template that includes space for absent students, the progress of each assignment throughout all six periods of the day, and my professional contact information. I also carry a hard copy map of the route to the school and a sign-out sheet for the students.

After I have all of this in place, I am ready to accept an assignment without scrambling in the morning. Instead I can take a few minutes to have a quiet breakfast and relax.

Arrive Early

When you arrive in the morning, make sure you have left enough time to touch base with teaching partners and administrators. Over the last few years, our board has developed a new protocol for classroom teachers to communicate with the occasional teachers who are filling in for them. Within the “red folder,” teachers must provide the class schedule, their own schedule, a schedule of supervision, a map of the school, a map indicating where workplace violence has occurred and of possible areas of workplace violence. It also includes behaviour plans and a list of students who have accommodations or triggers, or who tend to be off-task or require extra assistance or supervision. With this information at hand, there are no guessing games or surprises throughout the day.

Occasional teachers haven’t always had this protocol and not every board provides it. As a daily occasional teacher, it wouldn’t hurt for you to have a checklist of the information you would like to know about the students. Ask questions of those around you. From my experience, everyone wants you to be successful and the more information you have the better.

The Bell

Now you are ready to go over the day’s plans, get the attendance, and ensure that you have everything you need to do your job. A few minutes before the bell, put your name and date on the board. If you prefer, you can write a class schedule and/or introductory note. Respect the students’ morning routine. Don’t add anything that could throw students’ expectations off. Last but not least, remember that while you are busy assessing the students’ behaviour, they are busy assessing you. What type of teacher are you going to be that day? Smile and let them know.

Take the time to properly introduce yourself and use care in pronouncing students’ names. If you make a mistake, ask them to correct you and try to pronounce names correctly by the end of the day. As an occasional teacher you meet well over 100 students a week. It isn’t always easy to memorize everyone’s name, but you should try. Knowing names will make a big difference in how the day goes.

When all is said and done, enjoy your students. They are there every day to learn and you don’t know what else they have on their plates. Looking back now, I giggle at my first years of teaching. Some situations were so easily avoidable. If you take anything away from reading this article, know that it lies within you to make each teaching day a success. Start by doing one small thing to make the day better.

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