

# Concept

*a powerful, intriguing, inspiring, or perhaps odd idea distilled to its essential elements*

Suddenly I found myself in a position that required only two credentials: that I had been fingerprinted and that, yes, I was willing to submit to a background check. After I was hired, I was shown an instructional video on how to avoid contact with spilled bodily fluids and shown to my room. The kids were already there.

I was now a long-term substitute for a 6th-grade math class.

There are challenges aplenty for the long-term substitute—such as mastering the new computerized grading system; staying up to speed with the county-mandated, time-lined curriculum; and holding detentions. But the challenge that strikes with the most vociferous urgency is that no matter how many times you say (pleasantly or sternly or outrageously), “Please, be quiet,” the students, having clearly heard you, will not be quiet.

And so I was forced to teach the basics of the line plot, the stem and leaf plot, and the box and whisker plot amid a din of screeches, door slams, paper waddings, and genuine cries of pain. Imagine the squirrel monkey cage at the zoo. Had the zookeeper on a devious, post-beatnik tear added Benzedrine to the tree gum, the ensuing scene wouldn't be in-

credibly divergent from the scene in my classroom.

But as with all jobs that seem impossible at first, things got better. Thanks to the time-tested method of staying one chapter ahead of the class, I have been able to master, for the second time in my life, the line plot, the stem and leaf plot, and the box and whisker plot. Together, the students and I stumble across the mathematical epiphanies that the middle-school community has dubbed “aha! moments”—moments in which the ziggings and zaggings of math postulates seem to weave together to form a complex, yet cohesive, pattern.

Sadly, that pattern seems no less complex and takes just as much brain squeezing to master as it did when I was eleven.

**Benjamin Warner** *is a freelance writer and substitute teacher based in Baltimore, Maryland: benjaminjaredwarner@yahoo.com.*

## Lessons of a Substitute Teacher

### Recalling the Line Plot Amid Paper Waddings



By Benjamin Warner