

FALL 2003

Investment in Volunteer Programs Reaps Student Success

What is a "volunteer"? If the term reminds you only of moms helping in classes or baking brownies for a bake sale, read on. Things are changing. With tightening budgets, schools must maximize every resource to support student success. To squeeze more from your volunteer efforts, you may have to broaden your thinking. Dr. Joyce Epstein, director of the National Network of Partnership Schools, defines volunteer as "anyone who supports school goals and children's learning or development in any way, at any place, and at any time." She includes time families give to attend performances, sports activities, and other events.

Maximizing a volunteer program has costs, but the payoffs are far greater. A strong volunteer program has the power to improve student learning through increased one-on-one time with adults, enriched curriculum, and reduction of distractions. Commitment to the school also increases. Parents feel welcome, valued, and often gain self-confidence. Teacher morale increases along with their time for individual students and projects, and their understanding of family strengths.

Recruitment and Screening. It is essential to recruit widely, so all families feel valued.

Screening and careful matching of interests and skills of volunteers with the needs of the school are crucial to effectiveness and retention. Many schools survey both families and school staff. Because of the time required to set up and fill each opportunity, districts or schools should have one key staff member facilitate the process.

Training, supervision, and evaluation. All volunteers should have at least a brief orientation to meet key people, take a tour of the school, if they volunteer there, and ask questions. Job descriptions and a volunteer guide should spell out expectations and procedures. Staff also need training on supervising and working effectively with volunteers, to help them anticipate concerns and prepare information volunteers need. Evaluation is key to continual improvement.

Helping from Home: Not everyone can get to school during the day. There is an endless list of other ways to support education—Organize celebrations; prepare mailings; phone tree to pass information to other parents; prepare activity or display materials; sew costumes; build sets for performances; create flyers and certificates; format newsletters; contribute to the website; read stories on tape; write grants; work on publicity for events; translate notices and other information; solicit support from the community; collect donations for tag sales or other special events; recruit other parents; mentor by email or phone; carry information about school needs, resources and events to work or community organizations.

Appreciation: Most schools hold an appreciation ceremony, but most important is to recognize volunteers DAILY. Because volunteers contribute out of personal commitment, rather than for pay, they require a higher level of attention and support than employees. According to a recent study, to retain volunteers "we must be friendly, considerate, caring, interested in their lives outside the organization. This is a required cost of operating a quality volunteer program." Staff should go out of their way to say thank you. Students can make cards for birthdays and holidays. Volunteers who feel valued and needed are more committed to the school and its mission.

For more information, see for example, Chapter V of the National PTA's *Building Successful Partnerships: A Guide for Developing Parent and Family Involvement Programs*.

The View from Here

How can schools attract and maintain a large core of parent volunteers? Active parent volunteers with experience in several school systems can provide useful insight. James and Renee McNair, for example, have volunteered in local public schools for over 10 years. Their service has ranged from parent outreach to reading in classrooms and one-on-one tutoring. Here is their advice.

Reach out as soon as parents enter the school system. This shows parents that involvement in the volunteer program is expected. But do not to drop the ball as kids get older. Though older children may not want to see their parents in class, volunteering gives all children a message about the importance of school.

Start simple and be clear. Reach out to all families with simple, easy ideas for helping. Starting simple allows hesitant parents to gain confidence and comfort with the school. Make time frame and expectations clear. If a volunteer is to read with a student for example, clarify objectives. Should they work on some aspect of reading, or just provide an enjoyable experience?

Multiple opportunities: Though it is often the most prominent opportunity, many parents hesitate to work on fundraising. Schools must provide opportunities that fit different schedules and interests. Flexible time ranges may allow parents to come during a modified lunch hour or before work. Alternating times and days for meetings gives more parents a chance to participate. Surveying parent interest is great, but it is important to follow up so parents feel heard, even if it is to say that they will be contacted later.

Make information easy to find. Don't rely only on a newsletter or one time appeal at the beginning of the year. A colorful community bulletin board, for example, can make it easy for parents to find out how they can help. One central person designated as contact for questions about all opportunities makes it easier for parents.

Actively recruit dads so they do not feel out of place. Men often assume schools want moms unless they are specifically asked. Schools must work to make men feel at ease.

Offer professional development opportunities. This shows the school system values volunteers. Workshops not only improve volunteer skills, but also provide enjoyable opportunities to learn from school staff, each other and from other schools.

Show appreciation. Even more than ceremonies or awards, small daily acts are most meaningful--an administrator that takes time to shake hands and sit down with a volunteer for a few minutes; teachers that introduce themselves or send short thank you notes.

“Faced with what seems like an impossible task, a group of folks will do well to remember the African proverb: When spider webs unite they can tie up a lion.”

- Johnnetta B. Cole, former president, Spelman College

Recruit Volunteers Online

Looking for volunteers? In many areas of Connecticut, there is a new tool for reaching out to family and community members. At www.VolunteerConnecticut.org, it is easy to register descriptions of volunteer opportunities. The free service makes it simple for potential volunteers to find ways to help that meet hectic schedules or special circumstances. If the online service is not available in your area, the site connects you to your local volunteer center; another tool for matching people with time and expertise to specific opportunities. For more information on this website or your local call center, call the United Way of Connecticut at 860-571-7548.

Outreach Makes the Difference

A number of new initiatives have successfully increased parent involvement at **Southside School in Bristol**. But Principal Gary Maynard noticed that some families just never came into the school, perhaps due to language barriers or other discomfort with the school environment, or because of schedule or transportation difficulties. Maynard decided to reach out to families to ensure they feel welcome and understand their important role in their children's education.

Last fall, Southside School held 4 meetings in community centers in the housing projects in the neighborhood. They provided refreshments and a translator, when necessary. Maynard, along with the school social worker and psychologist, addressed parents informally, providing simple tips for supporting their children's academic success, and leaving plenty of time for questions and answers.

To be sure they reached every family, the school kept track of those not able to attend parent-teacher conferences. With assistance from the FRC, Maynard called each family just to ensure they knew when and where activities were being held and that transportation was available. As a result, parent-teacher conference participation increased to over 96% and the school has more than doubled its number of parent volunteers. Not all are able to come to the school regularly, but they actively support the school in ways that fit their needs, and feel more a part of their school community.

For more information, contact Gary Maynard, GaryMaynard@ci.bristol.ct.us, (860) 584-7812.

KidLine Links Generations

Sponsored by the **Norwalk Senior Center**, KidLine is an innovative intergenerational program that uses the telephone to connect children ages 6 to 13, with caring older adults for friendship and support after school. The award-winning program offers a simple solution to a complex problem—loneliness and isolation of the young and the old—by strengthening the bonds between them. The idea is for seniors, who may be homebound, to provide needed support and encouragement to children, who may be home alone after school.

KidLine matches interested children with mentors who call them several afternoons a week while many parents are still at work. Lorna Tenney, now in her third year of KidLine mentoring, says "calling the young girl I mentor is easy to fit into my schedule. I love talking with her, and it makes the children eager to get right home after school. Someone is waiting for them, and they have something special to look forward to."

KidLine creates relationships which comfort and reassure children, and allow seniors to share their wisdom and experience. It operates throughout the school year, but many chose to continue phone visits over the summer. The Norwalk Senior Center hosts an end of year celebration, which gives the seniors and students a chance to meet each other in person. Ms. Tenney states, "It is a gift for us to be able to participate in this program." With KidLine, students, parents and volunteers all benefit from the gift.

KidLine is recruiting adults over 50 for students on a waiting list. For more information, contact Megan Williams, megan-nsc@snet.net, 203-847-3115.



CT School-Family-Community Partnerships, a project of the State Department of Education, helps educators, parents and community members develop partnerships by providing training and resources that promote effective local policies and practices, and increase public awareness of the positive impact of school-family-community partnerships on student learning.

Project Partners:

Connecticut State Department of Education, CREC, CT Parents Plus at The United Way of Connecticut, & SERC

Resource Materials on S-F-C Partnerships

Book Buddies: Guidelines for Volunteer Tutors of Emergent and Early Readers. Johnson, F.R., Invernizzi, M., & Juel, C. (1998). Provides a model to help community volunteers tutor children at risk for reading failure. How-to resources for both tutors and instructors include guidelines for setting up a tutorial program. Appendices include alphabet cards, charts, lesson planning aids, and a glossary.

Available at the SERC Library. Explore SERC's extensive collection of resources available for loan free of charge. Located in Middletown, the library is open to the public Monday through Saturday. Call (860) 632-1485 for directions or hours. You may also request annotated bibliographies on a variety of topics including school-family-community partnerships. The collection of books, journals, videos and other material covers a broad spectrum of issues helpful for administrators, teachers and family members alike.

Families, Schools, Communities Learning Together: School Volunteer Guide. The Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, This PDF guide provides articles and forms that cover just about every aspect of volunteer programs, including how to start a program, a sample school board policy, a teacher's guide to working with volunteers, a discussion of fathers as volunteers, tips for tutors, and much more. <http://www.dpi.state.wi.us/dpi/dltcl/bbfcsp/pdf/fscvolgd.pdf>

Good Practice Guidelines. The Brighton & Hove Volunteer Bureau in the UK provides a detailed guide for supporting volunteers. The internet resource includes sections on policies, roles and responsibilities, recruitment, volunteer training and support, and evaluation. It includes many sample forms available to download in pdf format. <http://www.brightonhovevolunteers.org.uk/goodpractice/>

The National Mentoring Partnership provides a wealth of detailed, practical information about school-based mentoring programs, including information on the elements of an effective program, finding local support, and on many aspects of running a program. http://www.mentoring.org//run_a_program/main/common/main.adp?Community=2

LEARNS, Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory & Bank Street College of Education. This website includes a wide variety of tutoring and mentoring resources. Many resources such as the tutoring toolkit, training activities for tutors and mentors, or word games and activities to use with students can be downloaded without cost at <http://www.nwrel.org/learns/index.html>.

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For more information, please contact
Judy Carson, (860) 807-2122
Harriet Feldlauffer, (860) 807-2039
Wendy Harwin, (860) 807-2105
sde.partnership@po.state.ct.us
www.state.ct.us/sde/deps/Family/SFCP/index.htm

