

Seven Steps to a Successful Volunteer Program



1. Assessing Volunteer Needs at School

Volunteer coordinators or teams need to meet regularly and work with the teachers and staff members who will work closest with the volunteers. Volunteer coordinators or teams must do the following:

- Discuss the merits of volunteers and address concerns and potential problems that may develop among school staff, teachers, and volunteers.
- Survey/interview teachers, principals, and other school staff to determine, besides classrooms, where volunteers could work.
- Survey parents to learn about their talents, interests, and skills.

Volunteers can help in the following places:

In the office—Answer phones; assist parents; write grants; order supplies; create web pages, databases, and spreadsheets; and file papers.

On the bus—Serve as bus monitors or aides as well as walk children to and from the bus.

In and around school buildings—Repair furniture and playground equipment, fix plumbing or electrical problems, and landscape the grounds.

On the playground—Teach sports and games, or use carpentry skills to help build a fence or playground equipment such as a sandbox.

At special events/programs—Plan parties; provide child care; organize toy libraries, parent resource centers, and clothing and food drives; conduct arts and crafts activities; direct school plays; tutor students; and help with science projects in after-school programs.

In workshops—Speak on a variety of topics to other parents at community groups, service clubs, and so forth.

In the kitchen—Plan menus, make snacks, serve meals, and conduct special cooking projects with classrooms.

At home—Prepare mailings; sew costumes or draperies for plays; create learning materials for the classroom; design forms, newsletters, and fliers on a home computer; and tape record stories or music.

2. Working With and Training Principals, Teachers, and School Staff on Effectively Using and Supervising Volunteers

Principals can serve as the overall supervisor of a school's volunteer program. PTAs then can work with principals and encourage them to do the following:

- Inform staff and teachers about the mission of the volunteer program and enlist their support.
- Make space available to volunteers, such as a restroom or a lounge, and foster a receptive and warm climate for them.
- Hold meetings with volunteers and staff to create team spirit.
- Assist in providing training to teachers and staff on the appropriate roles of working with and supervising volunteers.

Effective Use of Volunteers

- Anticipate the information volunteers will need to carry out their assigned duties, such as signing in, where to find materials, how to set up an activity, and basic rules and management procedures.
- Prepare specific and clearly defined activities to be carried out by volunteers and assign them to a designated place in the classroom, office, and so forth.

Seven Steps to a Successful Volunteer Program, cont.



- Ensure volunteers understand the importance of the tasks you assign in terms of the bigger picture.
- Get to know volunteers. Encourage them to help plan activities or make suggestions based on their talents and interests.
- Let volunteers observe your techniques and assist you when you demonstrate an activity or complete a task that they later will be responsible for doing.

Supervising Volunteers

- Provide a regular time each week to plan with the volunteer.
- Give directions and explanations in nontechnical terms and always speak with respect to volunteers.
- Avoid assigning responsibilities to volunteers that they are not trained for or prepared to do.
- Give credit when it is due, and provide positive feedback and encouragement to volunteers for their contributions and progress.
- Prepare and inform other people about what volunteers will be doing. Reinforce their importance and accept them as legitimate coworkers.
- Introduce volunteers to the school staff or students with whom they will be working.
- Discuss any concerns regarding a volunteer's punctuality or performance as they occur. Request the principal or volunteer coordinator's help in resolving concerns only after a teacher or a school staff member has attempted to resolve the problem with the volunteer.

3. Setting Goals and Objectives for Volunteer Assignments

To ensure a successful volunteer program and long-term involvement on the volunteers' part, it is important that assignments are carefully selected and are productive, meaningful, and closely matched to volunteers' interests, skills, and motivation for volunteering.

Developing Job Descriptions

PTA volunteer coordinators, teachers, and school staff must work with each other to develop creative and specific job descriptions for volunteers.

Include the following:

- A title that describes the volunteer's responsibilities
- The position's importance to the school and the benefits the volunteer gains from the experience (This is an important, yet seldom used, part of a job description.)
- The qualifications needed to successfully do the job
- The person(s) to whom the volunteer is responsible
- Detailed descriptions of the volunteer's tasks
- How a volunteer will be trained to prepare for an assignment
- The length of time required for the position, such as, how many hours per week for how many weeks

4. Recruiting Volunteers

Recruitment should take place throughout the year to replace volunteers as well as to enlist additional assistance for new programs. Two recruiting issues need to be addressed: (1) Who can be a volunteer; (2) How to reach out and find volunteers.

Who: Although many parents now work full time, there are still vast reservoirs of talent and potential that often remain untapped because schools do not approach this perceived barrier in creative ways.

- Working 9-to-5 is not the norm for many people. Schools often overlook the large population of adults who work second and third shifts—predominantly late afternoon and evening hours—weekends, or flexible schedules as potential daytime volunteers.

Seven Steps to a Successful Volunteer Program, cont.



- Parents who do work a traditional 9-to-5 schedule can volunteer their time in the evenings, on weekends, or at home.
- Teachers and administrators should consider the range of skills available from adults who hold jobs in hospitals, fire and police departments, television and radio stations, and so forth, that can be applied to day or evening school programs.
- Adults who work in the evenings for computer services, newspapers, and restaurants are good prospective afternoon volunteers.
- Adults who work on the weekends in places such as parks, museums, libraries, and churches possess a wealth of talents to contribute to schools and usually have one or two full days off during the week.
- Self-employed adults, such as consultants, artists, or musicians, may have flexible schedules that can accommodate daytime or evening volunteering.
- Senior citizens are another underused, yet highly talented, pool of knowledgeable adults with unlimited skills that are easily adapted to school curriculum and programs. Furthermore, by volunteering at school, seniors can provide meaningful contact that helps build understanding between and appreciation for other generations.

How: It is important to arrange meetings at local work sites, senior centers, or retirement communities. At these meetings, volunteer coordinators or teams can talk with prospective candidates about the importance of, as well as the need for, their involvement with the school. Other methods of delivering this message can include the following:

- Posters, pamphlets/fliers, and brochures posted or given out at community supermarkets, banks, churches, and so forth
- Notices on community bulletin boards or in newsletters, newspapers, bills, bank statements, payroll checks, coupon booklets, and so forth
- Booths or exhibits at local stores, malls, community fairs, and so forth

5. Training and Orienting Volunteers

Orientation and training sessions set a welcoming tone and create support for volunteers. The sessions should be relevant, hands on, and geared toward the specific skills and responsibilities of each volunteer. The training sessions should be held at varying times to accommodate everyone's schedules. The supervising teachers or staff should give input into or, better yet, be a part of the training session along with the PTA coordinator or team. Orientation sessions should familiarize volunteers with the following:

School facilities—Provide a map and tour of the building and grounds. Point out important places such as the restroom, lounge, and coatroom.

School staff and teachers—Introduce volunteers to the principal, teachers, and office and custodial staff. An individual visit with the staff member or teacher with whom the volunteer will work to discuss specific responsibilities and a schedule is recommended.

Philosophy and mission of the school and the volunteer program and the school's operating policies and procedures—Provide a job description and information on confidentiality, ethics for working with students and staff, student discipline, dependability, attendance expectations of volunteers, and recording volunteer hours. Provide a handbook for volunteers to keep. During orientation, provide a time for questions, discussion, and filling out forms.

Seven Steps to a Successful Volunteer Program, cont.



Security—Before any volunteer begins service at a school, school administrators or staff should run a routine background check on each potential volunteer, just as they do with other school personnel. PTAs also can use state police programs to run potential volunteers' names through a database that will notify PTAs regarding any child sex offense convictions.

6. Retaining and Recognizing Volunteers

To develop and sustain a feeling of belonging and satisfaction among volunteers, it is important to do the following:

- Provide ongoing training to develop new skills that allow volunteers to try new assignments and work with new people.
- Train continually, and monitor teachers and staff to ensure that they are effectively working with volunteers.
- Treat volunteers like colleagues.
- Provide regular activities that recognize volunteers for their work and demonstrate the school's appreciation of their efforts.

This recognition needs to be both personal and universal. Personally, each volunteer is regularly and sincerely acknowledged in ways that he or she feels is appropriate and rewarding. Universally, all volunteers should feel a sense of camaraderie and be honored as a group at specific special events throughout the school year.

7. Evaluating Volunteer Performance and Program Success

As with any successful program, there needs to be continual evaluation that result in improvements. Through surveys, questionnaires, observations, and personal interviews the program's general success of meeting the needs of children, teachers, staff, and volunteers can be assessed. These methods also can be used to assess the individual performance of each volunteer, the effectiveness of orientation and training sessions, and the volunteer program's procedures and recruitment strategies.

Project Ideas for Implementing Standard IV: Volunteering



Ideas for PTAs and the School Community Working Together

Climate box

Place a box near the front office for parents to anonymously drop in observations and suggestions regarding school climate. Use this information to make the school's climate more inviting to potential volunteers.

Hard-to-reach parents

Reach out to parents who are hard to contact, through routine phone calling or e-mailing. Have each parent complete a card at open house or parents nights that lists one thing they commit to do in support of the school to help either the teacher or the principal achieve their goals that year. Another idea is to create a bulletin board for parents that highlights home-school projects and volunteer opportunities so all parents are informed about school functions and asked to be involved. The board also can be a place for parents to post ideas, messages, or volunteer services to staff.

Volunteer directory

Publish a volunteer directory. Survey parents, seniors citizens, and other community members regarding their interests, and use the resource book to help match school needs with volunteer talents. List volunteers' names, interests and talents, phone numbers, what days and times they are available, how frequently they would like to participate (including the option of just one time per year), and where they would like to volunteer, such as at school or from home. Distribute the directory to PTA leaders, principals, teachers, and office staff.

Creative contributions

Create volunteer opportunities that go beyond the traditional tasks that volunteers perform. Creative ways to volunteer include:

- assisting the school nurse
- organizing a letter-writing campaign to focus attention on an education issue
- helping to develop a drug and alcohol prevention program
- teaching mini-courses on subjects such as computers
- organizing parent events such as volleyball or softball games
- forming fathers' clubs
- assisting in special education classes
- providing transportation or child care so another parent can volunteer

Appreciation

Show appreciation for volunteers by creating a wall of fame display with pictures of volunteers helping with school activities and events, publicizing the contributions of volunteers in school newsletters, and providing incentives for volunteering. These incentives could include giving out awards or certificates to honor volunteers or coupons or checks that indicate their number of volunteer hours, which can be used at a volunteer store to purchase donated materials and gifts.

Project Ideas for PTAs and the School Community Working Together, cont.



Senior power

Send out surveys to local retirement communities or senior clubs to find seniors interested in volunteering in schools in a variety of ways. Senior citizens can share their life experiences as they relate to classroom topics. For example, a Holocaust survivor can talk to a history class, or a retired carpenter can assist in a wood shop class. Seniors also can assist teachers on a weekly basis with classroom duties, or seniors can be cast in school plays.

For Working Parents

Weekend and evening coordinators

Supervise and coordinate weekend or evening activities at the school, such as sports events, spelling bees, and homework assistance programs. Parents can bring their younger children to these activities, too.

Parents as consultants

Consult school staff and parents on their areas of expertise, and have them speak to students about their careers, such as what skills are used at their jobs and what education or training they need to do their jobs. Have parents with jobs in public relations, advertising, or marketing arrange publicity for a school program, take pictures or videos of students, and develop media presentations for school use.

Project Ideas for Implementing Standard IV: Volunteering



Ideas for Teachers

Recruiting methods

Teachers can recruit volunteers by working with room representatives to survey volunteer interests and coordinate volunteer activities for the class. Also, send home a monthly calendar so parents can plan ahead and sign up for a specific day to volunteer, and then provide specific volunteer activities for parents to do when they come into the classroom. Or recruit volunteers by asking children to invite their parents to participate in classroom projects and school events.

Business cards

Print business cards for teachers that include their names, subjects they teach, and phone numbers with the best times to call. On the back, list ways parents could assist in the classroom. Teachers can distribute these to parents at back-to-school nights.

Cultural awareness months

To celebrate everyone's culture, designate cultural awareness months at your school. Ask parents from all backgrounds to get involved in cultural events by coming in and speaking to classes about their family's and their culture's customs and traditions, foods, dances, and arts and crafts.

Project Ideas for Implementing Standard IV: Volunteering



Ideas for PTAs Working with Middle and High School Communities

While middle and high school students are more reluctant to have a parent directly involved in their particular classroom, research has shown the positive effects of some type of parent involvement at these levels as well (Henderson and Berla 1995).

Parents in the halls

Consider a program that encourages parents to drop in and get their exercise by walking at the high school instead of at a health or fitness club. After picking up a volunteer badge at the office, these parents perform an important service by increasing the adult presence in the building and thereby reducing behavior problems. Parents can get better acquainted with the school and their children's friends and teachers.

Curriculum enrichment

Create a program that has alumni, parents, or community members contributing to the curriculum on a regular basis. Volunteers could enrich social studies units and history classes by speaking on topics in which they have personal experience, such as World War II or the Civil Rights Movement. In geography, history, or foreign language classes, encourage adults who have traveled, been in the military, come from other countries, or who speak foreign languages to share their personal experiences, the history of other countries, and photographs or slides. Ask volunteers with appropriate expertise to assist in vocational classrooms or laboratories such as shop, auto mechanics, or consumer education.

Student-operated businesses

Invite adults who have business backgrounds to team up with teachers to create yearlong classroom projects that focus on developing student-operated businesses. Parents can help teachers instruct students on how to conduct market research to determine product lines and produce and sell the product in the community. They also can actively assist students in negotiating financing for their businesses with local banks and businesses.

Adopt and sponsor

Allow volunteers to adopt and sponsor an academic program, a school club, or a school team, and provide support throughout the school year. For example, parents can assist the staff and students with the publication of the yearbook, newspaper, or literary magazine.

Peer counselors

Volunteers can serve as peer counselors for parents having difficulty with their children. Parents can advise and comfort other parents, and share strategies that have worked for them to resolve similar problems.

Standard IV: Volunteering



Quality Tips for Successful Programs

- Survey parents about their interests, talents, and availability. Include options for volunteering on the survey, and then coordinate the parent resources with those that exist within the school and among the faculty.
- Survey teachers to find out how they would like to employ parents' talents.
- Ensure that volunteer activities are meaningful and built on volunteer interests and abilities.
- Ensure that office staff greetings, signs near the entrances, and other interactions with parents create a climate in which parents feel valued and welcomed.
- Educate and assist staff members in creating an inviting climate as well as effectively using volunteer resources.
- Ensure that parents who are unable to volunteer in the school building are given options for helping in other ways, such as from home or at work.
- Develop a system for contacting all parents to assist as the year progresses.
- Organize an easy, accessible program for using parent volunteers that also provides ample training on volunteer procedures and school protocol.
- Design opportunities for those with limited time and resources to participate by addressing child-care, transportation, and work schedule needs.
- Show appreciation for parents' participation, and value their diverse contributions.
- Develop a system for continually evaluating the parent volunteer program.