

ABSTRACT

This article describes work done on behalf of the Davis Joint Unified School District in California to determine the current extent of volunteer involvement, if that level should be increased, and ways to increase it if that outcome was desired. While groups of principals, teachers, parents, and students confirmed a generally positive attitude about volunteer involvement, common frustrations such as limited time available to coordinate volunteers, and no organizational structure to support the volunteer programs were viewed as the major barriers to increasing volunteerism in the district. Common assumptions about parental volunteerism were refuted, highlighting the need for increased communication of needs and interests between parents and school personnel to overcome barriers to increased involvement.

Assumptions Create Barriers to School Volunteer Success

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INTRODUCTION

Recently parental involvement in education has received much attention. The Goals 2000 Educate America Act includes as one of its eight national education goals that "every school will strive to increase parental involvement and participation in children's education." Education Secretary Richard W. Riley has identified family involvement as one of the top 10 critical education initiatives.

The Davis Joint Unified School District in California decided to study its effectiveness in the area of parent volunteerism. Approximately 100 teachers, 55 parents, 12 principals, and 40 students participated in discussion groups. All parents from nine elementary schools and the two junior high schools in the district received surveys. More than 50 were completed and returned. Fifteen interviews also were conducted with four individual community business, four university, and seven volunteer leaders. Literature on school volunteerism was reviewed, and six directors of model school volunteer

programs throughout the United States were interviewed.

The goal was to test the following hypotheses and answer the questions they raised:

Schools are overwhelmed.

Because of limited resources classes are larger and teachers have more children and more issues to address at school. It may seem wonderful to offer the services of volunteers to teachers and principals, but can we add the additional responsibilities of volunteer recruitment and administration to the day-to-day roles of school personnel and expect them to welcome it?

Volunteers have more skills to give.

Every parent has a multitude of skills, but few are asked to use them in the district. Skilled individuals don't know how to offer their skills to the school or that their skills are needed. And beyond parents there is the community at large—business leaders, retirees, and college students—who care and are concerned about

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education and could be recruited to volunteer in the district.

Volunteer administration is a profession like any other.

To be effective at volunteer administration, expertise is needed in applying principles developed by the profession over time. Professional skills and knowledge are needed to plan for and nurture volunteerism.

The school district wanted to answer the questions raised by these hypotheses:

- *How can we make the involvement of volunteers easier and more productive for school personnel?*
- *What keeps more parents from getting involved? Are there untapped sources of volunteer assistance in our community and, if so, what would it take to involve them?*
- *What, if any, principles of volunteer administration should be applied to the schools?*

WHY UTILIZE VOLUNTEERS IN SCHOOLS—WHAT'S THE BENEFIT?

A literature review on school volunteerism revealed a number of clear benefits that have been well documented.

Increased Community Support for Schools

The *National Committee for Citizens in Education* (Henderson, 1994) concluded that schools benefit from parent involvement through:

- improved teacher morale;
- higher ratings of teachers by parents;
- more support from families;
- higher student achievement; and
- better reputations in the community.

The National Research Council (1990) and Brudney (1990), among others, suggest that public sector organizations consider developing active volunteer programs for several reasons:

- Volunteerism helps citizens understand the needs, problems, and successes of

public sector organizations. This develops a strong cadre of supporters.

- Volunteer involvement lends credibility to advocacy efforts, since decision-makers know that volunteers are unpaid constituents.
- Volunteerism enhances services by providing the person-power to either expand existing services or develop new services with their skills and talents.
- Volunteerism increases community connections for public sector organizations by providing new or greater access to service clubs, cultural organizations and corporations.
- Volunteerism increases the organization's ability to "connect" with its diverse "customers" because volunteers reflect the community and represent more points of view.

Increased Educational Program Effectiveness

Positive educational results also have been well documented. The National Research Council's 1990 review of 34 studies on the effects of volunteer tutoring programs in reading showed that tutored children made significantly greater gains in reading skills than did untutored students in control groups. Tutoring, in the studies reviewed, was provided by parents, other adult volunteers, and peer or older student volunteers. The results also suggest that peer or older student tutors may be more effective than adult tutors.

While tutoring has been the volunteer activity most often studied by researchers, some studies suggest additional promising directions for school volunteerism. In a Washington, DC program, scientists and mathematicians were recruited as volunteers to lecture, conduct demonstrations, coach students for competitions, and lead science and math clubs. After a year, students were asked if their feelings about science and math had changed. Students reported they were more likely to study science and math and to seek science- and math-related careers as a result of the volunteers' interest and encouragement.

Cost Effectiveness

While the estimated monetary value of volunteer work can be substantial, it should not be considered "cost savings." Instead, funding for the volunteer program should be viewed as "leverage money," because it can help to finance services whose value can be worth much more than the original expenditure (Ellis, 1986).

WHAT RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS SAID ABOUT THE BENEFITS OF VOLUNTEERS

Results from discussion groups and surveys of principals, teachers, parents, and children in the California school district identified numerous benefits to involving volunteers in the schools. What follows is a sample of their responses:

Principals

- Volunteers become "goodwill ambassadors" for the schools. They help to enhance community understanding. They support schools and become advocates.
- They provide different role model opportunities and become another place for students to "connect."

Teachers

- Volunteers take some of the load off of us and stretch our resources.
- That they are here sends an important message to kids that school is important.
- They bring talents we don't have, enhance the program, and provide new opportunities for enrichment.

Parents

- Volunteering allows me to get to know the people who work with my kids and what's going on at the school.
- My kids feel proud when I'm here. My being here sends the message that school is important.

Second-Graders

- They help people who don't know as much and need help.
- They teach us new things.

IF VOLUNTEERS ARE SO GREAT, WHY AREN'T THERE MORE?

If volunteers are so effective, and everyone from school personnel to parents and children to national researchers believes there are benefits, why aren't there more volunteers? In the California district, principals and teachers consistently cited similar issues and concerns. They said:

- Quality control is difficult, and we have a particular concern with confidentiality issues.
- Volunteers need supervision and training, and we don't have time to do that.
- Most parents work and can't come to the classroom on a regular basis.
- The volunteers need training in classroom etiquette and discipline techniques.
- They only want to volunteer in their child's classroom. That may not be the only place we need help.
- Sometimes there's a mismatch between what the volunteer wants to do and what needs to be done. After all, "somebody has to cut the bunny ears."
- Volunteers say, "I want to do more than cut and paste," but reliability issues keep us from giving them more responsibility.
- It takes so much time to coordinate volunteers and define the tasks that need to be done. Also, it takes time to supervise, schedule, and communicate the need.
- Some volunteers come with their own agendas.

Many of the concerns identified by school personnel were mirrored in responses by parents who currently volunteer for the schools. They were asked to identify barriers to their success:

- I wish they would train me in appropriate discipline techniques.
- There is a lack of understanding about what the volunteer's role is.
- We need guidelines for volunteers on classroom etiquette and ethics.

- We do not get feedback from teachers other than “thank you.” We wonder, was our work beneficial? Did we do it right?
- Please clue me in on how the material is presented to the children so I can be more helpful. For example, how did the teacher explain long division? Explaining it the way I learned it as a child isn’t working.
- I have skills beyond what’s been asked for, but there doesn’t seem to be a way for me to use them.
- I haven’t always felt welcome.

In a written survey, parents who don’t currently volunteer for the schools were asked why not:

- I don’t feel qualified to participate in some of the things offered. Maybe if training were provided I would.
- I work full time so availability is a big factor. If the teacher were to ask in advance, I would make time available, but I can’t do so on a weekly basis.
- I have quit volunteering from time to time because I don’t feel valued.
- I think more outreach to the parent community could be done and a more welcoming atmosphere could be fostered. I attended two parent-teacher association meetings, and not one person introduced himself/herself or welcomed me.
- Providing a written list of all possible ways to volunteer with a brief description of duties would help me find a way to help.
- If I had more notice, I could ask for the day off from work.

Teachers and principals also were asked what would increase the number of volunteers and quality of their involvement. They said the district needed to:

- Recruit them.
- Train them.
- Coordinate them, define the tasks, supervise, schedule, offer recognition, and communicate the need.
- Ensure they are dependable.
- Identify their particular skills.

Parents who were active volunteers, as well as those not currently volunteering for the schools, listed what was needed to increase volunteerism:

- A clear and solid organizational structure with volunteer roles and tasks clearly defined.
- An understanding of the diverse needs and objectives of parents.
- Teacher training to help manage volunteers. Some teachers who are good with volunteers could teach others.
- An inter-school directory to share resources to match people with specialized skills to appropriate volunteer assignments.
- Reaching out beyond the parent population to others in the community such as students and faculty at the local university.
- Recruiting people with specific skills who don’t know they are needed.
- Reaching out to people who want to help, but don’t know how.
- Making volunteers feel welcome. If they feel on the “outside,” bring them in.

ANALYSIS

All the major players—principals, teachers, volunteers and non-volunteers, students and business leaders—hope for increased resources for the schools through volunteer involvement. All agreed that a major barrier is lack of organizational structure to support volunteerism. Concerns expressed by school personnel and volunteers centered around the need for volunteer program management.

All view volunteer job identification, recruitment, appropriate placement, scheduling, training, supervision, and recognition of volunteers as necessary for success. The fact that no one currently has the time available to accomplish these administrative tasks was seen as the major barrier to increasing volunteer involvement in the district.

McCurley and Lynch (1989) state that “volunteer programs do not work spontaneously, but require someone to devote

the care and attention required for fitting together a complex system matching the needs of the agency with the needs of the volunteers and the community." Bemby (1996) demonstrated that "trained volunteer coordinators can have a significant impact on both increasing the number of volunteers and improving the qualitative aspects of a volunteer program."

The school district could acknowledge the need to coordinate volunteers and administer a volunteer program. Increased communication between each group could eliminate erroneous assumptions between educators and volunteers. Identification of issues that inhibit productivity, and addressing them jointly with district personnel and volunteers, will allow volunteerism to grow and flourish in the district.

School Assumptions Examined

- *Volunteers and confidentiality don't mix.*

Principals and teachers were consistently concerned with volunteers' abilities to maintain confidentiality, a critically important standard of their profession, yet little or no direction had been given to the volunteers on this subject. Volunteers repeatedly expressed a desire to understand school policies better so they could feel more comfortable and be successful in their roles.

Other organizations where confidentiality is an issue—hospitals, AIDS support systems, mental health programs—have successfully instituted policies, procedures, and training for volunteers which require strict adherence to confidentiality regulations.

- *Volunteers won't take responsibility for discipline.*

Teachers and principals repeatedly expressed astonishment that parents seemed unwilling to apply adequate and appropriate discipline techniques while volunteering at school. Parents, however, consistently wished for better understanding of their role in discipline. Parents easily identified the need, but had been given little or no direction about appropriate disciplinary measures they could apply. Fur-

ther, they had been given no authority in this area. They assumed discipline was the teacher's domain, not theirs. Many parents in the district expressed a desire for training in this and in other areas.

- *Parents want to volunteer only in their own child's classroom.*

Both teachers and principals often seemed to limit potential volunteer assignments to the classroom, and then further assumed that the parents' interest was to volunteer only in their child's classroom. It was found, however, that physically being in the classroom on a regular basis is not of interest to some volunteers, and may not be possible for others. Many felt that just being present somewhere in the school sent the right message to their children that they cared about education.

Parents with little interest in participating in classroom activities wished to use their skills on behalf of the schools, but often felt frustrated that no opportunities were available to them. Professions that provide access to resources within the parent population include psychologist, nutritionist, banker, veterinarian, dance teacher, scientist. Parents also had expertise in environmental issues, swimming, nature study, computers, and grant writing. If a system were in place to accommodate these offers of help, the schools would be richer indeed.

Parents also have made assumptions about what the schools need based upon the often limited, classroom-based volunteer jobs they have been offered. Some assume that if they don't have professional experience in education, they aren't qualified to help and therefore can't be useful. Yet many non-classroom school needs are unmet and volunteer skills not utilized.

A striking example was evident in all discussion groups when teachers and principals expressed a strong need for help with the repair and maintenance of school buildings and equipment. Builders, plumbers, and electricians certainly are among the district's parent population, as well as being represented in the local busi-

ness community, but if these potential volunteers aren't aware of a need they won't self-identify. While liability and union issues must be explored in these and other areas, dismissing these potential volunteers out of hand neglects a large potential source of untapped service providers.

- *Parents who work outside the home are not willing to volunteer or are unreliable.*

While it is true that many parents are in the workforce, they nonetheless expressed a willingness and a desire to help the schools if jobs could be created for them less often than on a weekly basis, and/or outside their working hours.

In response to the written parent survey, 58 percent of those parents who did not volunteer at school reported they were active volunteers in other settings where their schedules were accommodated, or their talents better utilized.

- *If they really wanted to volunteer, they would already be here.*

Many teachers and principals in the discussion groups believed that anybody who is willing and able to volunteer will come forward on his/her own. This assumption is refuted by parents who said that volunteer time slots in a regular classroom are inconvenient and that they don't know of other ways to be helpful.

Successful volunteer recruitment requires an understanding of the need to offer choices for involvement which accommodate volunteers' skills, needs, and interests. Each volunteer is motivated to volunteer for a particular, individual set of reasons. While for many volunteering begins with a desire to "give back to the community," motivation may also include one or more of the following: a desire to meet people, share skills, learn new ones, explore a career path, feel part of a team, or gain experience.

The school district seeking volunteers must take a marketing approach to find human resources needed to accomplish its goals. The exchange should be viewed as one in which both the school district and the volunteer benefit.

In addition, potential sources of volunteers other than parents have been only minimally explored. Education was identified as the number one priority by 450 corporate CEOs when asked where they would like to see their corporate volunteerism resources applied (Wild, 1993). In the California district, local business and university leaders expressed a strong willingness to involve themselves and their colleagues in service to the schools, but they had been frustrated trying to "find their way in." A carefully planned recruitment strategy has great potential for the recruitment of large numbers of non-parent volunteers.

It seems clear that assumptions are being made that limit volunteer involvement. Examination of false assumptions would go a long way to accommodate the desires of parents and others to become more involved.

SUCCESS FACTORS IDENTIFIED

In a study of successful school volunteer programs across the country, the National Research Council (1990) identified the following factors necessary for success:

- *Support by Top Policy Levels*

Strong support from the school board must be expressed publicly, preferably in the form of a written policy. Sincere personal approval by the superintendent and participating principals also is apparent in successful programs.

State-level support in the form of a position or policy on school volunteerism, a contact person or office within the state department of education, and seed funding to provide incentives for participation also are helpful.

- *Organization and Management*

Organization and management were found to be key factors in determining the outcome of successful programs. Although the structure and operation of successful programs vary, a district administrator generally is appointed. This person—with

the aid of a coordinator or team at each school—takes major responsibility for volunteer activities, including record-keeping and preparation of recruitment and training materials.

In successful volunteer programs, the district administrator consults with teachers and principals in each school to assess their need for volunteers. This “central office” either recruits and places volunteers directly in the schools, or trains a school team (usually consisting of a volunteer and a member of the school’s staff) to recruit, then train and manage the site’s volunteers. The district administrator also develops district-wide procedures, and is responsible for assisting in cultivating community and/or business contacts.

- *Involvement of Teachers*

The relationship between the teachers and the on-site volunteer coordinator is critical. Teachers with no training in supervision of volunteers are sometimes reluctant to take on what they perceive as a burden rather than a help. Therefore, successful volunteer program coordinators provide training not only for volunteers, but for teachers and other staff as well.

Involvement of the teachers’ union is also a critical success factor. “Both of the major teacher organizations support the use of volunteers in schools, with the provision that they [volunteers] work under the supervision of professional teaching staff, and are not used to replace teachers or school aides” (National Research Council, 1990). Lack of commitment to this concept on the part of policy-makers and school volunteer program coordinators can be a major impediment to success.

- *Recruitment, Training, and Placement of Volunteers*

The most successful programs recruit volunteers from a variety of sources—senior citizens groups, businesses, colleges and universities, students from other elementary and secondary schools—and always, parents. As in other volunteer pro-

grams, it seems the best recruiter is an enthusiastic, satisfied volunteer.

The critical importance of orientation to the volunteer program and training for the specific job cannot be over-emphasized as success factors. Many potential pitfalls such as misunderstandings about the expectations of volunteers or about important policies such as confidentiality can be avoided successfully with clear role definition and good training.

- *Recognition of Volunteers*

Successful programs give much time and attention to the way volunteers are treated. While formal recognition such as dinners or plaques most often come to mind, research shows that informal recognition based on the volunteer’s needs and interests is the most valued. Personal notes of appreciation, name-tags, or mention of service in newsletters or local newspapers often are more appreciated than the grandest dinner meeting. Well-designed training programs provided as a part of volunteer service often also are perceived by volunteers as benefits of their involvement and, therefore, as a source of recognition.

CONCLUSIONS

It appears there exists broad support for the idea of attempting to increase volunteerism in the district. Lack of volunteer coordination and administration of the volunteer program, as well as communication barriers based upon erroneous assumptions, seem to be factors which stand in the way of success.

The following steps to further develop a volunteer program for the district have been recommended and are currently under consideration:

- *Commitment from the Top*

For volunteerism to be successful, both the superintendent and the school board should take formal action on its behalf. A good beginning is to develop a policy on volunteer involvement in the district.

- *Ensure Effective Volunteer Program Administration*

A district-wide volunteer administrator should develop a strategic plan in conjunction with key players: teachers, parents, students, principals, union representatives, and community leaders. This person is responsible for coordinating the volunteer efforts at participating school sites, as well as encouraging appropriate recruitment and placement procedures and orientation and training programs for both volunteers and staff. A cost/benefit analysis will determine the ability of the program to "leverage" the dollars allocated to create additional resources for the district.

- *Think Beyond the Classroom*

Many parents and community businesses would like to help schools, but not in the classroom. For example, gardening, training design and delivery, clerical, carpentry, and grantwriting skills were mentioned as needed by district personnel. Although liability and union issues will need to be explored in some of these areas, these are examples of skills volunteers have and schools need that don't require classroom attendance by the provider.

- *Think Beyond Parents*

The business and university communities (faculty, staff, and students), retirees, and junior high and high school students are valuable volunteer resources. Many opportunities exist for the development

of outstanding programs with non-parent volunteers.

It is hoped that much of what was learned in this school district will be applicable in the development of school volunteer programs in other communities.

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