

A Career Development Lattice For Low Income Parent Volunteers In Schools

By Michael Kane

Today volunteering must produce some benefits for those who give their time and energy to assist others. Often, the benefit of volunteering is that of mutuality -- the volunteer learns, or receives from the client as much as he/she gives. Many of us who are volunteer coordinators leave this process of mutual exchange to the volunteer and the client and assume that it happens naturally -- one less worry for us. Or we devise 'rewards' such as luncheons, volunteer days, plaques, and let the rest of the process of mutual exchange take care of itself.

This article focuses on the school volunteer as a recipient and as a giver, and looks at what some would call a utopian reward system for low income parent volunteers in schools. It assumes that one can both serve others and attain personal objectives. The article further assumes that parent volunteers in low income schools have already contributed significantly to large urban school system goals. National research has shown, for instance, that where parents are involved in schools, vandalism,

discipline problems, and many other negative behaviors are reduced. Parents in some large school systems have become reading tutors, community liaison workers, library aides, hall monitors, cafeteria workers. If the testimony of many administrators in a large school district, such as New Orleans can be believed, it is evident that parents have contributed much to the education of their own children. However, more research has to be done on this topic, particularly as to the relationship between parent involvement and improvement of math and reading scores in inner city students. It is not the purpose of this article to prove the assumption. *Rather, I would like to focus on reward systems for volunteers in schools -- more specifically, what can school districts do for volunteers from low income levels who may need other rewards besides luncheons and plaques?*

VOLUNTEER MOTIVATIONS

People today volunteer for a variety of motives. This phenomenon is not limited to persons from low income situations. College students are a good example. Many college students today volunteer not because they are brimming over with the idealism of youth, but because they need practical experience, in addition to a degree, in order to place themselves in a favorable position in competition for jobs in an economy that is still suffering from a stiff recession. So the trend on college campuses is experiential learning, field placements, work-study. More and more students, particularly in the

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social services, are discovering that each year of their college experience has some element of community service involved. Many volunteer not just because they are getting a grade in the course, but because they need to pick up some skills that no classroom can teach. My contention is that if the middle classes are feeling their need to get involved to pick up skills, why cannot the traditional volunteer agencies or traditional skill-builders, such as schools, perform the same function with members of low income groups?

Immediately a red flag is raised. We are already dumping too many responsibilities on schools. School districts are underfunded already; teachers are underpaid. Training parents in potentially economically useful skills is already being done by federal job training programs, private enterprise, unions, and even church groups. Schools are having enough trouble just getting kids through twelve years of schooling and enabling those kids to fill out job applications at the end of the period. These are all serious objections to schools assuming one more function.

But all these objections overlook the tremendous potential that schools have for changing their role to include parents in basic education programs. It is possible that by expanding their role to include parents, schools may find the key to raising test scores in reading and math. Adult parent volunteers are already present in schools -- some in New Orleans volunteer every day without any reward except the satisfaction they get from seeing their child learn. No one has to offer them money to be present in the school. Federal job training programs may be failing, not only because they are in some cases training people for non-existent jobs, but because they have failed to motivate participants beyond the vague promise of a job and the fact that a participant can usually make the minimum wage while he/she is in training.

Schools are society's traditional method for certifying individuals as possessing sufficient skills to enter the work force. Certification should mean the assignment of some economic value to the skills and life experiences of low income parents. Volunteer work in schools could serve as skill development apprenticeships for parents of low-income children.

Parents of school age children who have been denied access to the traditional certification routes could utilize schools in new ways, while at the same time continuing to

give valuable volunteer service to those same schools. State boards of education and local education agencies could give recognition and certification to volunteers in many of the paraprofessional roles they already perform in schools.

EXPANDED ROLE OF VOLUNTEER COORDINATOR

Obviously the role of a volunteer coordinator would be expanded by the implementation of a program of certifying the volunteer experiences of low income parents. Volunteer coordinators or resource persons would design career lattices. By a career development lattice, I mean simply a well-designed plan for each participant volunteer which would outline progressively responsible volunteer jobs, the skills necessary for performing those jobs, the possible paid career outcomes of those jobs and a suggested time line. The plan would incorporate into it some basic educational goals in reading and math and outline methods to reach stated goals. It would include a detailed learning plan both from experience on the volunteer job and structured periods of interaction with staff. Harriet Naylor of the HEW Volunteer Development Office has already done some work on this. Herta Loeser, in her book Women, Work and Volunteering has made a significant contribution to the concept.

Volunteer coordinators could list skills which are learned in the context of schools and begin to devise time-phased plans for each volunteer in an inner-city school. *Each plan would have two outcomes: one would focus on types of volunteer services which could be rendered in a school setting to clients (i.e., students), and the other would be learning goals for the volunteer which would assist the volunteer in seeking eventual paid employment.* The second outcome would be recognized as a legitimate and desirable outcome of volunteer service in a particular school.

What are some marketable skills that schools can teach? Parents can learn some intangible skills as volunteers in schools. They learn the skills of working with children in a formalized setting. They learn the value and the necessity of working cooperatively as members of an educational team. They learn the roles and functions of educators both professional and paraprofessional. They learn the human relations skills of working with a varied group of administrators, teachers, children, and other parents. All of these skills can be utilized both within education and in other fields such as business, service occupations, health and sales.

Beyond learning intangible skills related to values, attitudes and roles, parents can learn concrete skills in schools which are applicable outside a school setting in many paraprofessional fields. For example, many parents have mastered the art of counseling through their volunteer work in elementary schools -- to such an extent that some principals in New Orleans are proposing that parents be brought in to assist professional counselors in talking with some students. Many low-income volunteers have learned the skills associated with tutoring on the elementary level. Many work as nurse's assistants in schools which cannot afford the luxury of a full-time school nurse. Many assist in cafeterias as food service volunteers, both in breakfast programs and in regular lunch assignments. Some work in the school office and learn valuable clerical and secretarial skills. Other school districts will have any number of other roles that low income parent volunteers, many with limited formal education, perform for children each day of the school year.

Actualization is the key. Volunteer coordinators must devise structures that bring to life dormant skills, that teach new skills to persons whose aptitude for learning is limitless. Presently, if volunteers do possess untapped skills, we rarely bring them out in other ways than a few orientations in tutoring, library work, etc. Some systems do provide on-going classes in tutoring which also help up-grade reading and math skills for the volunteer tutors. But for many, skills are only actualized in on-the-job performance. That is, a volunteer 'fits' because of a certain quality of personality, initiative, or skill. But rarely does the volunteer coordinator point out in a systematic fashion these skills or qualities of personality could lead to economically useful alternatives either within or without the school system. As yet, no one has systematically listed job entry skills which experience as a school volunteer could teach. The Dictionary of Occupational Titles could offer a willing coordinator much assistance here.

TRANSLATING SKILLS INTO JOBS

The core problem we are faced with is that there does not yet exist a mechanism for the translation of skills into jobs. Some school systems teach volunteers tutoring skills in reading and math. Others have very successful adult education programs. These programs could be supplemented by active and aggressive career counselling and job development. In some cases, parents would have to concentrate on obtaining the G.E.D. as a

minimal certification. In addition to G.E.D., state and local school boards could certify that a particular volunteer has obtained both theoretical and practical knowledge of the art of tutoring in the public schools. Or these educational agencies could award a certificate, to be presented to a prospective employer, that a volunteer has had x number of hours of instruction in food preparation or health care in addition to x number of hours of on-the-job experience.

CETA funds or a grant from a private or public funding agency could be utilized to devise a system of 'translation' within the context of the public schools. The monies provided would assist volunteer coordinators and school districts in demonstrating that parent volunteers in public schools possess marketable skills as a result of a combination of practical instruction and volunteer experiences within the schools.

To accomplish this objective several things would be necessary. First, a volunteer coordinator would list the skills which volunteers could learn as a result of parent volunteer experiences. Examples that come to mind are paraprofessional skills in tutoring, skills in health assistance roles in schools, skills in clerical and administrative work of a routine nature, skills in roles as library assistants or as recreation aides, skills in food preparation and distribution. Secondly, volunteer coordinators, school system research departments, or the local manpower agency could do some basic research to determine the economic needs of a community in these areas and other related areas. Once this research is done, the next step would be to devise a career lattice or a 'plan of action' with each volunteer who would wish to participate in the program. *This plan would greatly emphasize career counselling, concrete instruction in various skill areas, and some record-keeping to determine which volunteers had completed which phases of the training.*

A school, or schools, would have to be chosen where such a program would have a very favorable chance to take root and where the community has the needs and resources. An ideal school would be one where volunteers are already performing well and staff relationships with volunteers are excellent. Programs such as this have the best chance of success in schools where experimentation and innovation are built into the structure of the school. School staff and teachers would have to be adaptable and flexible. Additionally, the staff of the school could not be threatened by volunteers with other than the traditional goals of volunteer work

as their motivating force. Union contracts, especially paraprofessional contracts, would have to be safeguarded. Unions might buy into a program such as this, particularly if they are involved in its planning stages. In such a school, staff would have a significant role in instruction of the volunteers.

A CASE EXAMPLE

Concretely, the following scenario presents a possible outcome of volunteer service within the school. Mrs. Jones, a parent with little or no formal education, presents herself as a volunteer in the school breakfast program. She works for one-half year as a cafeteria aide. During that period she receives from the cafeteria manager ten hours of instruction in food service, cafeteria management, food preparation, in any combination. She also receives from a teacher on staff (with the permission of school administrators and the union) ten hours of basic instruction in reading and math skills directly related to food preparation.

During the second half of the year, she again volunteers to work in the cafeteria and receives additional instruction in basic reading and math. At the end of one year of volunteer work, she receives a certificate from the local school board listing exactly what her accomplishments have been over the past school year. During this one year period, she has had on-going career counseling from a program staff member. Her possibilities now include looking for a job as a private or public cafeteria worker, continuing as a member of the breakfast program's volunteer core to gain additional experience, or continuing her education through utilization of the G.E.D. program. Whatever her career choice, she would be placed on a list for job development at the earliest possible opportunity. Or she could change tracks entirely after one year. During her first year as a volunteer, she has proven herself to be dependable, able to work cooperatively, and highly motivated. She has also learned a great deal about food preparation and distribution as well as basic skills in reading and math.

In September, after interviews with her career counselor, she volunteers to read basic stories to a kindergarten class and to perform basic drill exercises with the class while the teacher introduces new concepts. She learns, with the assistance of the classroom teacher, to work with children in a structured setting. She receives further instruction in reading and math, this time geared specifically to the tutoring relationship with children. At the end of this

period, she could be certified to work in a day care center or in a classroom as a paraprofessional aide or in year-round Head Start. When she completes the G.E.D. she could be considered for hire by the school system in another school. Or she could continue her education through community schools or community colleges geared to assist persons who go to college in non-traditional ways. (Schools without walls, part-time colleges, night colleges and other experiential learning situations would be a great help here.)

We could trace Mrs. Jones through several volunteer jobs in the public schools. At each step of her volunteer experiences, practical on-the-job activity would be combined with specific instruction geared to assist her in obtaining new jobs, either volunteer or paid, that would teach new skills. Job counselling would assist her in recognizing possible new career opportunities. The school system would link up very closely to a community's job development program, possibly utilizing computerized metropolitan job banks to assist in locating available opportunities. Links could be established with other training programs in the community for possible referral of volunteers and special skill development.

SUMMARY

This program would be difficult to implement in many of the traditional school settings. The New Orleans Public Schools are attempting to develop several educational alternatives for students. This program might simply be an alternative for parents in those alternative schools. Its uniqueness is that it uses the volunteer experience as the focus of instruction.

I honestly do not know if a program of this type can take root anywhere before some fundamental changes are made in the educational institutions and in other community institutions. Employers, for example, need to realize that schools can and do teach volunteer skills. Unions would have to be flexible, and the volunteer coordinator who wished to adopt such a model would need a lot of help.

A career development plan; thorough analysis of community needs; aggressive job development; a willing professional staff; a creative volunteer coordinator; volunteers motivated by the project; and, time, money, and cooperation from other community institutions are the ingredients necessary for the successful implementation of this suggested volunteer 'reward system'. It is a lot more complicated than arranging a volunteer luncheon

But, if economic self-development is the key need of your volunteers, this type of reward structure might help answer that need and serve as a motivating force for the individual volunteer. The volunteer coordinator must maintain a creative balance between the needs of the agency, the needs of the client, and the needs of the volunteer. This article simply tilts the balance slightly in consideration of the needs of the volunteer, while not forgetting service to the primary client, the student.