REVEILLE FOR VOLUNTEERS†

By Elinor Wolf*

The 1960's might be christened the decade of the volunteer. Once the preserve of the avant-garde, volunteer movements now draw housewives, executives, senior citizens, college youths, and even high school students who want to give time and energy to community service. Many of these volunteers are discovering that helping in the schools—especially understaffed, crowded urban schools—is a deeply rewarding experience.

In these schools volunteers can release the teacher to perform her main task—teaching. They can take attendance, watch the lunchroom, staff libraries, and check children's health. They can add their special talents to school enrichment programs and tutor children who need extra help. They can bring freshness and enthusiasm to schools where both staff and students are often tired and discouraged.

But sometimes enthusiasm—although vital—is not enough. In the past few years literally thousands of school volunteer projects have sprung up across the country. Most are sponsored by various local organizations—community action and religious groups, settlement houses, PTA's, and college societies. Very often, there is no coordination between volunteer programs that are sponsored by different organizations in the same city. As a result their services may actually duplicate one another: three different organizations might offer tutoring in reading, but nothing in math, for example. Some of these independent programs are short-lived and sporadic. Most do not have the resources to train volunteers adequately.

Another danger, especially with tutoring programs, is that the volunteer may not be placed where she will do the greatest good. Unless the child is referred by his teacher, the tutor can't be sure that this particular child needs extra help more than his classmates. Ideally, all volunteers should be in close contact with

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school staff to make certain that they're doing the things that are most needed. But this relationship is not easy to achieve because educators often do not relish the assumption of responsibility for an additional program or welcome the thought of nonprofessionals looking over their shoulders. Indeed, some principals and teachers still refuse to have anything to do with volunteers.

One way to help avoid many of these problems is to establish a single, coordinated volunteer program for the entire city school system. Even in spontaneous activity like volunteer work, there is a need for an organization man—someone who recruits hundreds or thousands of volunteers, sees that they are trained, and places them where they are needed. With good organization and direction a volunteer program can flourish even where schools are unfriendly, especially if the volunteers make it clear that they want to cooperate with the school officials.

The Boston, Mass., School Volunteer project is a case in point. The driving force behind this program is Edna Koretsky, an active worker in community and State education associations for many years. Although other groups had tried and failed to establish a large-scale volunteer program—partly because the schools were not responsive—Mrs. Koretsky felt that a well-planned, efficient effort might win the school administration's approval.

In 1965 Mrs. Koretsky rounded up a small group of volunteers and started looking for a "port of entry" into the school system. At the time, Boston's compensatory education program was under strong attack from the community, and the schools were reluctant to admit outsiders. However, some school officials were eventually convinced that the volunteers just wanted to come into the schools and help in as many ways as possible; they were not there to criticize.

As a trial step 28 volunteers were invited to come regularly to six Boston schools. At first their duties were restricted to nonprofessional chores like collecting milk money. But within a few weeks the school staffs began asking the volunteers to do individ-

ual work with pupils—to tutor non-English speakers, slow readers, and poor math students. As Mrs. Koretsky and her staff continued to seek out interested administrators—and as the volunteers proved their worth in action—more principals were inclined to give them a try. This fall 72 Boston schools have asked Mrs. Koretsky for 800 volunteers. Many of these schools are located in the central city.

In directing the School Volunteer project, Mrs. Koretsky and her staff plan new programs, establish overall standards for volunteers, do recruiting, place new candidates, and help fill vacancies. Their recruiting message is heard in TV spots and at afternoon teas. They also keep in close touch with the board of education, school principals, and volunteers to make sure the program is working out well for all concerned. Each school has its own chairman of volunteers who coordinates activities there; larger schools may have several chairmen.

This kind of efficient, organized volunteer program offers a real carrot to the principal: He knows that his school can have volunteer services without having to do the work of administering the program. He may have to find space for tutors and provide some training for both volunteers and the teachers who supervise them, but that's about all. Problems that arise concerning the volunteers can usually be handled within the volunteer organization: If a volunteer doesn't work out, the director will find a new place for her and do it discreetly, without a fuss.

Boston schoolmen were won over to the program in part because they knew they could trust the volunteers. Each recruit attends an orientation session where the program's central staff makes it clear that the volunteer's job is to help the students. It is not to spy, criticize, or otherwise interfere with the school. The volunteer must be reliable, spending an average of two to four hours per week at school. Candidates who refuse to work within these boundaries are screened out of the program.

The Boston volunteers who tutor also keep in touch with their charges' teachers. Most of the tutoring is done on the school

grounds; a tutor takes her tutee to a separate room (or wherever space can be found, including hallways) and gives him individual instruction for about 40 minutes. Then the child returns to regular classes. Teachers or subject area specialists supervise the volunteer's work, although she usually has considerable choice of the materials and methods she will try.

In organizing her program Mrs. Koretsky cooperated with the National School Volunteer Program (NSVP), a private, nonprofit organization in New York City which offers advice and information to cities that want to start school volunteer programs. New York City's Public Education Association, a group of citizens interested in education, organized a prototype volunteer program for New York City in 1956; by 1964 their efforts had proved so successful that the Ford Foundation gave them funds to found NSVP and stimulate volunteer programs in other major American cities.

Since then school volunteer programs based on the New York City model have taken root in 17 large urban centers and in numerous smaller cities. Most of these programs—especially those in smaller cities—started out with support from private sources. Once they were working smoothly, many were incorporated into the local school hierachy and financed largely by the board of education—a tribute to their success. As a part of a school system, some volunteer activities are eligible for support under the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965; funds may be used to hire program staff, train volunteers, and purchase materials.

NSVP suggests that school volunteer programs be "feasibly connected" with the local board of education. This relationship not only benefits children by helping guarantee cooperation between the volunteers and the school system, it improves chances that the volunteer program will get funds from the school budget. Although NSVP recommends general guidelines for setting up programs, each city has been free to work out its own relationships among the volunteer organizations, the board of education, and participating schools. The Boston program is at one extreme:

The volunteer activity is sponsored by a private citizens' organization, the Council for Public Schools, Inc. It has always been independent of the public school system, although a small part of its budget comes from the board of education.

The Detroit, Mich., program illustrates the great value of having volunteers attached to the public school system. The Department of School Volunteers in Detroit is a branch of the school administration, and its director is a school employee. Since the volunteer activity grew up with the full backing of the school system, the board of education, and Detroit's professional teachers associations, there was never any conflict between volunteers and the "education establishment."

For the past three years Aileen Selick, the program's director, has made sure this unobtrusive cooperation continues, not only between schools and volunteers, but also with students and the communities where target schools are located. Like other school volunteer directors who follow NSVP guidelines, Mrs. Selick sends helpers only where they are wanted—to principals and teachers who have specifically requested their services. After volunteers are assigned to a school, Mrs. Selick explains their mission to the principal, the teachers, and then to everyone else at the school—secretaries, lunchroom staff, custodians, and even the engineers who must find parking space for them. Parent groups and other members of the community are also invited to talk with the volunteers. This public-relations-conscious approach has paid off: Since 1964 the number of volunteers in the Detroit program has grown from 116 to 3,000.

Other programs that follow the NSVP model have been established in a variety of ways, wherever local interest could be found. In San Diego the volunteers were organized through the Urban League in cooperation with area colleges. In Seattle the impetus was an enthusiastic principal who attended an NSVP workshop and came away convinced that his city should have a volunteer program.

Along with its consulting services NSVP provides materials and bibliographies for volunteers. There are booklets on tutoring

in specific subjects, on forming volunteer library brigades, and on relating to inner-city children and their parents. NSVP also provides information about other volunteer projects throughout the country, a much-needed service in a field where most independent efforts are small and little known.

Such information is extremely helpful to volunteers, a great many of whom are suburban matrons with little experience in the problems of inner-city schools. The volunteer programs offer recruits some training—usually about eight hours, although tutors often receive still more instruction from experts at the schools or nearby colleges. Most volunteer programs also carry on some sort of inservice training throughout the school year.

Another major source of school volunteers is college students, most of whom tutor. The National Student Association estimates that about a quarter-million collegiate volunteers are helping schoolchildren this fall. A number of colleges have seen fit to give their students formal credit for their off-campus tutoring activities. Baltimore area colleges, for example, count tutoring as field work for courses in education, psychology, and sociology.

Even high school students are getting into tutoring. In fact, many 11th and 12th graders have shown a rare ability to relate to youngsters who seek something with which they can identify in school. In Detroit, student clubs and honor societies have offered their members' services for tutoring. Some of the youthful tutors come from suburbia and from private schools as well.

Adult male volunteers are much sought after by the school volunteer programs, although to date the effort has not been universally successful. However, in Philadelphia and Boston, "released time" has been given by large corporations so their executives may tutor or enrich school programs. About 100 successful business and professional men are finding time to counsel junior high students in Philadelphia. If executives are sometimes too busy to volunteer, recruiters may have better luck convincing senior citizens to help. In Chicago retired doctors and businessmen tutor in science and math, and in Detroit several

retired members of the United Auto Workers Union have been trained to help social workers give therapy to schoolchildren.

Most volunteer programs are now making a determined effort to recruit more inner-city parents for volunteer work. Sometimes this is not an easy task, despite the fact that many parents want to do all they can to improve their children's schools. It is difficult to convince some of the parents that school volunteers don't need a Ph.D. or B.A. to be valuable, that they just have to care about children. Working parents must squeeze volunteer activities around a full-time job; and for many inner-city residents, carfare to and from school and babysitter fees while doing volunteer work can be a real hardship. Some of these expenses can now be reimbursed with funds under title I ESEA.

When neighborhood parents can be encouraged to volunteer they are invaluable as helpers and as a bridge linking the school and the community. They help break down the wall of isolation, the separateness from the community which has developed in urban public school systems. In addition, volunteer experience sometimes leads to paid jobs at the school. One supervisor commented, "When we lose a volunteer, the schools usually gain a teacher or a teacher aide." The middle-class volunteer who leaves the school often does so to continue her own education. In general the dropout rate is extremely low in organized volunteer programs.

No matter what the source of volunteers, an organized program is most likely to make their experiences truly worthwhile simply because it stands the best chance of survival. It has been proved that regardless of age group, social background, or religion, volunteers can work side by side to help overcome the problems of the schools. All it takes is a board of education, a volunteer organization, and some schools that are interested—and an organization man who will help them get together.