

# Expanding Volunteerism in Rural Schools in Nova Scotia: Promising Practices

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In 2005, Mount St. Vincent University did a study of volunteerism in rural schools in Nova Scotia. The information in this fact sheet is based on the responses of 179 parent volunteers and 49 school administrators. The purposes of the research were to:

1. Identify promising practices for expanding school volunteerism by drawing on the expertise and experiences of rural school administrators, parents, and community members.
2. Describe barriers to developing and sustaining school volunteer programs in rural schools.
3. Identify institutional supports at the school district and school board levels that can help to enhance school-level best practices.

## Promising practices

Research shows that an organized program of school-community partnerships contributes to improving the school, strengthening families, enhancing community support for schools, and increasing student achievement and success.

Active school volunteerism programs are central to establishing and sustaining school-community partnerships. According to our research, rural schools that have successful school volunteer programs share the following characteristics:

1. Both school personnel and volunteers work to establish and sustain ongoing two-way communication, both oral and written. Open communication leading to positive working relationships is key to school volunteerism.
2. School administrators play a central role in creating and sustaining school cultures that support active parent and community involvement.
3. Managers or coordinators take responsibility for administering the volunteer program. In the most effective programs, someone other than an already over-worked school administrator or staff member provides this coordination.
4. Schools or school districts provide teachers with professional development on the benefits of school volunteers and how to work effectively with them.
5. Schools establish organized programs of volunteer recruitment that include written communications (newsletters, special announcements, websites); personal contacts by administrators, teachers, or other volunteers; parent-teacher associations; and contacts with other community organizations.
6. Schools provide screening, orientation, and training for volunteers.
7. Schools develop clear guidelines for volunteers through print or electronic handbooks.
8. Schools provide the broadest possible range of on-site and off-site activities for volunteers. Successful programs begin with the assumption that parents and community members have many different kinds of skills and talents that can benefit the school.
9. Schools recognize their volunteers in a variety of ways, both formally (e.g., volunteer teas or breakfasts; thank-you letters, pins, certificates or gifts at the end of the year; special events during volunteer week) and informally through day-to-day interactions.

## Barriers to volunteering

**Time** is the most significant barrier. Administrators expressed this in terms of the lack of time that they and their staff members have to devote to recruiting, training, and managing volunteers. Parents related the issue of time to their own busy lives, where families often have two parents working outside the home or where a single parent has primary responsibility for children. Some stay-at-home parents expressed the view that they are assuming more than their share of the responsibility for volunteer activities, such as fundraising, that are vital to the school.

Other barriers include:

- attitudes and beliefs of both staff (lack of understanding about the benefits of volunteers, concern about extra work, unwillingness to invite parents as partners) and community (lack of confidence, fear, feel not welcome);
- lack of child care for non school-aged children;
- lack of transportation;
- insufficient training for both staff and volunteers;
- lack of appreciation or recognition for volunteers; and
- policies and regulations such as criminal records and child-abuse checks.

## Recommendations

Based on the research, we offer the following recommendations:

1. Because the role of the school administrator is central in establishing and sustaining school volunteerism, **school districts** should set clear expectations and provide professional development related to volunteerism to all aspiring and incumbent school administrators.

2. Both **schools** and **school districts** should develop policy guidelines that are supportive of volunteerism.
3. **School administrators** should give emphasis to establishing and sustaining school cultures that invite active parent and community involvement.
4. **Schools** should develop program supports, such as volunteer handbooks, that enhance communication between schools and volunteers.
5. Both **schools** and **parents and community** members should contribute to making available a wide variety of in-school and off-site opportunities for volunteers that can be done both during and outside of school hours; this can increase participation in school volunteer programs and overcome the common barrier of too little time.
6. **Everyone** involved in school volunteerism should find ways to recognize and celebrate the contributions of volunteers.

The manual *Expanding Volunteerism in Rural Schools in Nova Scotia: Promising Practices* provides more detailed information regarding the research and an expanded description of best practices.

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