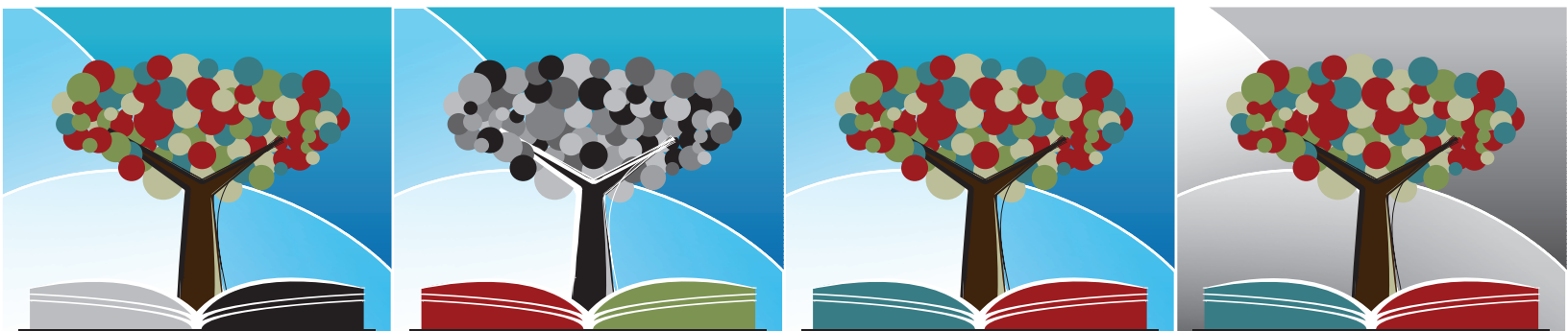


K N O W L E D G E   D E V E L O P M E N T   C E N T R E



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

## School Volunteer Manual

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The logo for Canada, featuring the word "Canada" in a serif font with a small maple leaf icon above the letter "a".

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

## Introduction

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The purpose of this research was to identify best practices related to expanding the diversity of opportunities for school volunteers in rural Nova Scotia. There is a substantive body of research evidence documenting the positive effects of the active involvement of parental and community volunteers in public education (Boone, 1995; Center on School, Family, and Community Partnerships, 2006; Epstein, 1995, 2001). There also is evidence, both research and anecdotal, to suggest that schools face growing challenges in recruiting volunteers and sustaining successful volunteer programs (Buck, 2002). These challenges are exacerbated in rural schools, where the volunteer pools are smaller, distances are greater, and public transportation limited or non-existent (Harmon & Dickens, 2004; Hixson, 1995). The issue of school volunteerism in rural schools is of particular concern in Nova Scotia where the majority of schools are located in rural or semi-rural communities.

Data were collected from a literature review; three participant surveys (one to district administrators in rural school boards, one to rural school administrators, and one to parents of children in rural schools); and three focus groups. Surveys were distributed to six district administrators, with none returned; to 153 school administrators with a 32% return; and to 1,273 parents, with a 14% return.<sup>1</sup> Focus groups included one meeting and two teleconferences. The surveys and focus groups provided an overview of current practices related to the use of school volunteers in rural schools in Nova Scotia.

The objectives of this research were to:

1. draw upon the expertise and experiences of rural school administrators, parents, and community members in order to identify best practices related to expanding opportunities for school volunteers;
2. describe barriers to developing and sustaining school volunteer programs in rural schools; and
3. identify institutional supports at the school district and school board levels that can help to enhance school-level best practices.

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<sup>1</sup> There was no response from the district administrators probably because no one at district level is responsible for school volunteers: it is seen as the responsibility of each school.

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This manual is intended to be helpful to rural school administrators and teachers, school boards, parent associations, and community groups that wish to design effective and sustainable school volunteer programs that will maximize the participation of a diverse range of parents and community members. Although the data was collected in Nova Scotia, the contents of this manual should be of interest to rural school communities within the Atlantic Provinces and in other parts of Canada. The manual should also be of interest to those working in organizations whose mandate includes children and youth.

## What does current research say about school volunteerism?

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Current research offers perspectives on the benefits of school volunteerism and on the ways schools and school systems can establish and sustain school volunteer programs despite the barriers that exist, particularly in rural schools. Insights particularly relevant to volunteerism in rural schools are summarized below.

### Collaborative school learning communities enhance student achievement

*A school learning community* includes educators, students, parents, and community partners who work together to improve the school and to enhance students' learning opportunities (Epstein & Salinas, 2004).

Research and field work (Epstein, 2001; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Sheldon, 2003) show that school and community partnerships contribute to:

- improving schools
- strengthening families
- enhancing community support for schools
- increasing student achievement and success.

The Center on School, Family, and Community Partnerships at Johns Hopkins University has had an active research agenda for a number of years. Researchers at the center have identified school volunteerism as one of six types of parent and community involvement that have proven beneficial. The others are parenting (assisting parents with parenting skills, providing family support, enhancing

the school's understanding of family backgrounds and cultures); two-way communication; learning at home; decision-making (involving parents as participants through committees and school councils); and collaborating with communities. The center has many publications that can be reviewed and ordered through its website, which is included in the reference list at the end of this manual.

Activities that involve parents and other community members with student academic learning, such as parent participation in well-designed at-home activities, have the greatest direct positive impact on student achievement. Other forms of involvement, however, are equally important to developing and sustaining positive and collaborative school cultures. Studies of school reform in Chicago schools, conducted over the past decade, have identified *relational trust* among adults (administrators, teachers, and parents) as the central feature of such cultures (Bryk & Schneider, 2002). The schools with the highest levels of trust also demonstrated the most significant positive changes in student achievement. An effective program of school volunteerism can help to enhance trust as school staffs and parents form partnerships to create more positive and supportive learning environments for all students.

## Features of effective school volunteer programs

Developing and sustaining an effective school volunteer program requires commitment, planning, and organization. Research has documented the importance of the following features:

### 1. Program management and coordination

Drawing on a range of research related to volunteer programs in the public sector, Brudney (1999) concludes that the most successful programs have managers or coordinators who have responsibility for overall administration. He also reports, however, that empirical research shows that most coordinators have many other responsibilities that limit the time that they can spend in overseeing volunteerism. Research suggests that it can be effective for volunteers to manage other volunteers, a practice that holds promise for schools, where the responsibility for volunteer programs usually rests with already overworked principals or designated staff members.

### 2. Professional development for staff

Although some teachers regularly use volunteers in their classrooms and work as partners with them in other school activities, most teachers can benefit from professional development related to working with parents (Jones, 2001). A 1997 study mentioned by Jones (no citation provided by Jones) showed that many teachers report that working with parents is the one of the hardest parts of their job. One-time workshops or short sessions are less effective than staff development and administrative guidance over time. Principals and school districts have roles to play in ensuring that teachers have such learning opportunities. As well, school districts have a responsibility for setting expectations for school administrators regarding working effectively with parents and for providing relevant leadership development in that area.

### 3. Recruitment

In many schools, individual teachers manage small, classroom-focused volunteer programs; for example, parents may read with students, chaperone school trips, help with preparing materials, or share expertise in curricular or co-curricular areas. For school volunteerism to have a significant impact on school culture and student achievement, the school as a whole has to make a commitment to engaging as many parents and community members as possible. This requires a clear articulation of the ways in which parents and community members can be involved as well as an organized and sustainable program of recruitment. Recruitment programs that extend beyond parents to untapped groups such as seniors and youth hold much promise (Shrestha, Cihlar, Kassouf-Mackey, Littlepage, Zahn, Green, et al, 2004).

### 4. Communication

The importance of open, two-way communication to the success of school volunteerism cannot be over-emphasized (Epstein et al., 2002). Equally important is ongoing interaction between school staff and volunteers through informal conversations, training sessions, and social gatherings to recognize volunteers' contributions. As well, it can be helpful to establish guidelines for how staff and volunteers can address problems that arise, for example, if there are conflicting understandings of expectations or if a volunteer is not working out in a particular role.

### 5. Training for volunteers

Effective volunteer programs give attention to orienting new volunteers and providing specific preparation for the tasks that they will be doing. Training includes teaching the skills, knowledge, and procedures required. Ongoing in-service training can help to sustain participation and renew volunteers' commitment and sense of being valued. Such training can help to alleviate burnout and turnover (Brudney, 1999).

### 6. Flexible and varied activities and schedules

The most successful school volunteer programs provide the broadest possible range of activities in which volunteers can participate (Epstein et al., 2002). Schools recognize that some parents and community members are able to commit only to one-time volunteer activities while others can participate more regularly. Successful programs begin with the assumption that parents and community members have many different kinds of skills and talents that can benefit the school. Our manual includes examples of ways schools have expanded volunteer opportunities.

### 7. Recognition

Ongoing recognition and appreciation for the contributions of volunteers is key to keeping them involved and interested. Along with communication, as discussed above, schools can plan special events such as volunteer teas or lunches to celebrate their volunteers. As well, schools can design volunteer certificates and involve students in thanking the volunteers who help them.



## Barriers to school volunteerism

In the 2000 National Survey of Giving, Volunteering, and Participating only 27% of respondents had volunteered in the year previous to the survey (Canadian Centre for Philanthropy, 2004). The 73% of respondents who had not volunteered identified several barriers to their participation such as:

- did not have extra time (69%);
- were unwilling to make a year-round commitment (46%);
- gave money instead of time (38%);
- had not been personally asked to volunteer (37%);
- had no interest in volunteering (25%);
- had health problems or were unable to volunteer (24%);
- had already made a contribution (22%); or
- did not know how to get involved (20%).

When designing school volunteer programs, schools need to take these barriers into consideration. The issue of **time** is particularly problematic in school volunteerism because work obligations prevent many parents from being present in the school during school hours. Time is also a factor for school staff, who are often reluctant to take on the added responsibility associated with working with volunteers.

### Other barriers include:

- concerns about legalities of volunteering, in particular liability on the part of both volunteers and school personnel (Kompf & Dworet, 1992);
- parents' own negative school experiences, which may make them reluctant to volunteer (Jones, 2001); and
- parents not having the confidence to volunteer or feeling that they do not have the skills to be volunteers (Jones, 2001).

## Special challenges faced by rural communities

Rural schools face additional special challenges in developing and sustaining volunteer programs. A 2004 report commissioned by the Points of Light Foundation and Volunteer Center Network in the United States identified common issues that persist across diverse rural communities, in particular, struggles faced by low-income rural families:

*“Disconnection and isolation, and issues such as transportation, affordable and reliable child care, healthcare, and living wage jobs not only affect the well-being of rural families, but also impact the ability of rural residents to engage in community activities”* (Shrestha et al., 2004, p. 2).

On the other hand, within many rural communities there are traditions of informal volunteering and reliance on neighbours, family, friends, and the community to meet many needs. In such communities, schools “serve as centers for civic education and community employment” (Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 2005) and can take the lead in enhancing learning opportunities for students that meet their community’s social and cultural needs. Noting that the central role of schools in rural communities does not necessarily translate into anything more than fundraising and bake sales, Harmon and Dickens (2004) challenge school board members in rural districts to work to achieve a much higher level of meaningful parent and community engagement in schools.

**Most formal volunteers in rural communities are middle-income. The barriers to volunteerism among low-income residents in rural communities that were identified through research by Shrestha, et al. (2004) show how challenging it is for rural schools to give *all* parents and community members access to volunteer opportunities. Participants identified the following challenges:**

- lack of reliable public and personal transportation;
- lack of time: low-income individuals and families struggle to meet basic needs (e.g., caretaker responsibilities, parenting, earning income);
- lack of self-confidence;
- negative perception of volunteering: some low-income people are inhibited by fear of ridicule;
- negative perceptions about low-income people;
- lack of reliable and affordable child care;
- language and cultural differences, especially in communities with new immigrants;
- wariness of outsiders and a sense of local self-reliance;
- communication barriers: lack of appropriate modes of communication and use of effective messages on how people can be involved, especially in remote areas (p.18).

Although these research findings relate to barriers to volunteering faced by people with low incomes, a number of them apply more generally to potential volunteers in schools. Many middle-income parents also deal with issues of transportation, time, child care, and lack of confidence. Communication barriers between schools and their communities affect all parents.

The Shrestha et al (2004) research concluded that there is *“overwhelming evidence that supports the critical need to find place-based solutions to overcome challenges in engaging rural residents, especially marginalized low-income populations”* (p.3). Notwithstanding the need for each rural school and the community it serves to design a school volunteer program suited to the specific context, the experiences of other schools can help to inform those efforts. The sections that follow provide many examples of approaches rural schools have used to overcome these challenges in order to enhance their school learning communities through vibrant and supportive school volunteer programs.

## How does our research match the features of the promising practices?

The participants in our research project identified many of the features of promising practices documented in the research literature related to school volunteerism. The surveys and focus groups provided additional insights into the specifics of those practices in rural schools in Nova Scotia. These are highlighted below.

### 1. Flexible and varied activities and schedules

Principals and volunteers reported a wide range of activities, more within the school (62%) than off school property (38%). For administrators, 89% reported that volunteer fundraising is an extremely important activity compared with 60% of parents on-site and 52% of parents off-site. Focus groups of volunteers in rural schools confirmed that fundraising is a major focus for them. The survey of administrators showed that many schools (92%) use volunteers to help in the classroom. Schools also reported that they involve volunteers in school-wide events (94%), athletics (79%), and clubs and special programs (58%).

The parent surveys asked respondents to indicate more specifically the nature and location of their involvement. Their responses are reported below.

#### On-site volunteer activities include:

- involvement with teaching and learning: working with individual children (5%), supporting classroom activities (34%), preparing classroom materials (10%), and offering expertise as part of curricular or co-curricular learning experiences (17%);
- chaperoning (40%);
- supporting lunch and breakfast programs (32%);
- telephoning (25%);
- volunteering in the school library (23%);
- supporting special events (23%);
- parent / class representative (21%);
- participation in parent/teacher organization or school advisory council (17%);
- providing labour (6%); and
- providing additional supervision on the playground (6%).

#### Off-site volunteer activities include:

- driving students to sports events and other activities (40%);
- chaperoning school trips (34%);
- telephoning (25%); and
- running special events (18%).

Small numbers of volunteers (less than 1%) noted other types of volunteer activities such as coaching, immunization support, book fairs, checking for head lice, researching, and clerical tasks.

*Please note that these percentage figures are based on the responses of 179 parent volunteers and 49 school administrators.*

## 2. Program management and coordination

Approximately one third (33%) of the respondents to our administrator and parent surveys reported having a person designated as coordinator. In most cases (78%), a staff person in the school is responsible for managing and coordinating volunteers. In the remaining 22% of cases, volunteers take on coordinating roles, in some cases through the school advisory council (SAC) or parent-teacher association (PTA). Less than one percent of the schools surveyed reported that the school has an area of the school dedicated to volunteers. In the focus group discussions, several volunteers reported that it is sometimes difficult to find the space to work when they are asked to prepare materials.

## 3. Professional development for staff

From the responses of parents, both to our survey and in focus groups, it appears that there is great variation from school to school with regard to the attitudes and behaviors of school teaching staffs in relation to school volunteerism. Parents commented on the key role of the principal in setting the expectations for teachers and in creating a school culture in which the participation of volunteers is welcomed and valued. Parents described how schools changed, becoming either more or less friendly to volunteers, with changes in administration.

## 4. Recruitment

The school administrators and parents surveyed reported the following recruitment practices:

- school newsletters (administrators: 95%; parents: 27%);
- special announcements/letters to community members (administrators: 71%; parents: 59%);
- word of mouth (administrators: 84%; parents: 34%);
- parent-teacher association (administrators: 86%; parents: 27%);
- direct recruitment through personal contact, initiated either by the principal or a teacher or by parent who is willing to volunteer (administrators: 59%; parents: 28%); and
- contact with a community organization (administrators: 17%; parents: 10%).

A majority of schools (95%) appear to use school newsletters and other written communications as the primary means of recruiting, although only 27% of the parents who responded to the survey reported that they had been recruited through a newsletter. It appears that parents are more responsive (59%) to written communications specifically related to volunteering.

In the focus group discussions, several parents reported that in their schools a small group of volunteers handle everything. Those who offered this information described two different situations. In some schools, few people volunteer; in others, the parents said that those outside the group in control do not feel welcome or needed.

## 5. Communication

Both administrators and parents indicated that there is frequent informal communication through brief conversations in person or over the telephone.

Other forms of communication include:

- newsletters
- information provided through parent organization
- regular meetings or periodic workshops.

Less than one percent of the schools had handbooks for volunteers. Both administrator and parent surveys showed that less than one percent of schools had formal programs through which they evaluate individual volunteers and / or the volunteer program. Volunteers receive feedback, however, as reported by both administrators and volunteers. Administrators indicated that they rely primarily on informal discussions (80%). Volunteers reported that they receive feedback to their work through meetings (20%) and informal discussions (35%).

Through follow-up discussions in focus groups, administrators elaborated on how challenging it is to overcome some teachers' reluctance to have parents in the school and in their classrooms. Participants suggested that this reluctance can stem from lack of confidence on the part of the teachers or teachers' beliefs that parent involvement produces extra work for them and can interfere with their teaching. Comments related to communications revealed that administrators often find it challenging to get information out to parents in rural areas and to receive regular feedback from them. These communication challenges adversely affect recruitment efforts.

## 6. Recognition

Schools recognize their volunteers in a variety of ways, both formally (through 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. From the parents' perspective, the formal recognition is welcome, but in conversations with them in focus groups, it became clear that the special events are less significant than the day-to-day expressions of appreciation and valuing. Comments that administrators made in focus groups and on the surveys provided specific examples of small ways in which they recognize volunteers in their schools such as:

- random expressions of appreciation in addition to recognition only at the end of the year;
- knowing each volunteer by name;
- talking with volunteers when they are in the school;
- thanking volunteers over the PA system each day;
- noting the contributions of volunteers in the newsletter on a regular basis; and
- working along with the volunteers, for example, reading with children.

In the focus group conversations and written comments, parents often noted that the satisfaction that they gain from interacting with children and knowing that they are helping students to succeed is the best form of appreciation and recognition.

## 7. Training for volunteers

Most schools (97%) had a screening process in place for volunteers, developed either at the school level or by the school district. At a minimum, this involves criminal records and child abuse checks. About one third (36%) of the schools provided an orientation for volunteers. Less than one percent offered other formal training such as workshops. Much of the training is task-specific and is handled by the staff person with whom the volunteer is working.

## What does our research say about barriers to school volunteerism?

The administrators and parents who responded to our survey reflected somewhat different perspectives on barriers. However, the majority of both administrators (95%) and parents (79%), identified time as 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. In the focus groups, several 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.

### **In addition to lack of time, administrators reported the following barriers to recruiting and maintaining volunteers:**

- cumbersome policies and regulations (for recruiting volunteers: 54%; for maintaining volunteers: 44%);
- negative attitudes (reported for recruiting only): staff (23%) and community (18%);
- burnout and lack of incentives for volunteers to maintain involvement (33%); and
- inadequate communication with volunteers once recruited (18%).

Other barriers reported by less than one percent of the administrators were inadequate staffing, insufficient training, transportation, and lack of funds.

The administrators were evenly divided on whether these barriers interfere with volunteer programs minimally (50%) or moderately (47%). Only one respondent reported that the barriers interfere to a maximum degree. All of the respondents to the survey, both administrators and parents, however, were from schools that have volunteer programs. It is reasonable to assume that the reported barriers interfere to a much greater degree in schools that do not have volunteer programs.

**In addition to lack of time, parents identified other barriers to volunteering. These include:**

- being unsure how they can help (59%);
- lack of child care for non-school-aged children (43%);
- feeling that they have nothing to offer (38%);
- not having children of their own in the school (37%);
- lack of transportation (24%);
- being too busy with other volunteer organizations (24%);
- not knowing anyone at the school (18%);
- not feeling welcome (13%);
- concern about liability (12%);
- lack of encouragement by the school or school board (11%); and
- not wanting to be screened and / or finding the screening process complicated (1%).

Almost two thirds (65%) of respondents indicated that they would like to be able to volunteer more. When asked what schools could do to enhance school volunteerism, parents made the following suggestions:

- communicate more with parents and the community about the importance of volunteers (65%) and communicate more about the specific ways volunteers can and do support the school (62%);
- provide orientation (51%);
- suggest ways that volunteers who cannot come to the school can help (e.g., create flexible schedule for volunteering) (43%);
- organize child care for non-school-aged children (29%);
- have a volunteer handbook (23%);
- provide workshops (23%);
- have regular meetings with volunteers (23%);
- have informal discussions on a regular basis (20%);
- provide recognition for volunteers (19%);
- designate a special place in the school for volunteers (12%);
- provide financial support (1%).

The focus group conversations and written comments reflect similar perspectives, leading to the conclusion that **open communication** leading to **positive working relationships** contributes significantly to the success of school volunteerism. Principals should provide the leadership for this according to parents.

As one parent expressed it:

*“It all depends on how good the administrator is at allowing parents into their school and supporting them. We’ve had some that are terrific and some who aren’t. The more open and honest you are with parents the more interested and empowered they feel to help out.”*

## How are rural schools meeting the challenges?

Through this research it became evident that many rural schools in Nova Scotia are employing creative and imaginative strategies to implement already identified best practices and to invent their own in response to the challenges in specific school contexts. These schools are finding inventive ways to take advantage of opportunities, recasting “barriers” as challenging problems that can be solved through commitment and collaboration among staff, parents, and community members.

### Volunteer opportunities

There are many opportunities both on-site and off-site for volunteers to help out schools. Nearly two thirds of parents (59%) stated that reluctance to volunteer often stemmed from being unsure how they could help. Parents expressed a desire to know what the volunteer positions entail in terms of expertise and time commitment. It is particularly important for parents who are new to a school to have clear descriptions of the requirements and activities of each volunteer position. It is also important that parents see the wide range of opportunities available to them.

Although 68% of parents indicated that they are still involved with the traditional volunteer positions at the school site, working with individual or small groups of students, helping classroom teachers in the classroom or to prepare materials, working in the library or with a lunch program 18% indicated they volunteer for the school but off-location and not necessarily during regular school hours.

There are many different kinds of volunteer opportunities available in schools. In general, they fall into four categories:

#### 1. Classroom-based opportunities

These Include:

- being present in the classroom on a regular basis to work with individual or small groups of children – listening to students read, reading to students, helping small groups with a subject-based activity such as a math problem, working at an activity centre, playing board or other games, etc.;
- being present in the classroom or with the classroom teacher during a special activity – field trip, art project, celebration party, etc.;
- taking individual students or small groups out of the classroom to work on specific, teacher-directed activity;
- preparing classroom materials – photocopying, cutting, gluing, drawing, filing, making charts, setting up bulletin boards, etc.;
- organizing and restocking classroom areas and program materials – bookshelves, activity centres, home-reading book bags, etc.;
- being a classroom or room parent – providing communication liaison between the classroom teacher and all the parents / families of that class and sometimes working as a co-coordinator for other volunteers in the classroom; and
- providing expertise, instruction, or information in a specific area – teaching a craft, talking about an expertise or interest (e.g., knitting, painting, building a doghouse, living in Africa, creating a personal website, etc.).



## 2. Specialist-based opportunities

These Include:

- volunteering in the school library – shelving books, signing out materials, collecting materials for teachers, reading to groups of students, assisting with research, making displays, repairing books, and helping with Book Fairs and other library-based fundraising activities;
- volunteering under the direction of resource personnel with students who require additional support; reading to or with them, providing support during assessment activities, and creating special materials; and
- volunteering with music, art, physical education, English as a Second Language (ESL) teaching, technology (computer), and drama specialists to provide support for their programs, activities, and students.

## 3. School-based opportunities

These Include:

- doing clerical tasks (filing, typing, labelling, photocopying, collating, laminating,), working on safe arrival or student head count teams, developing telephone trees for emergencies;
- helping with school-wide special events – helping to set up, work as judge or assessor for science fairs, organizing and / or running fundraising or community-invited events (dances, spring fairs, concerts, plays, etc.);
- serving on committees – parent / teacher association, school advisory councils, or specific committees set up by the school or one of the parent organizations;
- participating in health-related activities – checking for head lice, treatments, setting up and maintaining school's first aid kits, nutrition displays and workshops, etc.;
- providing supervision – on the playground, in the gym, or in the hallways; and
- being involved with school-wide programs such as breakfast or lunch programs (setting up, getting supplies, stocking shelves, taking orders, preparing food, serving, being lunch buddies, cleaning up, making posters for the cafeteria), running activity clubs, and volunteering with sports programs and teams (coaching, supervising, chaperoning, driving, fundraising for, being a referee, etc.).<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> It is important to note that within some school systems, there are collective agreements or district policies that do not allow volunteers to perform certain tasks already assigned to employees.

#### 4. Off-site before and after school opportunities

Parents who cannot come to the school during regular hours are often willing to provide support in alternative ways. Some of these ways include:

- doing research; collecting information; shopping / picking up supplies; writing (reports of events for newsletter, grant applications, etc.) planning or organizing events; making materials for classrooms; library, specialists or school displays; telephoning; working on developing special projects such as a parent directory, telephone trees, school or classroom Web site; etc.;
- fundraising: soliciting materials and prizes; preparing materials such as posters or tickets; selling; organizing others; collating information or monies; and accounting; and
- providing labour (e.g., woodworking, painting, digging, gardening, constructing), and chaperoning for trips / events outside of school hours.

### Recruitment

Throughout our research, concern was expressed about the difficulty of attracting new volunteers and about the fact that the same small group of people often “does everything.” It was expressed as a concern both by those who felt that no one else would help out and by those who felt that they could not “break into” the group. Volunteer recruitment is an on-going activity. To increase recruitment, remember the following:

**1. Advertise the benefits.** Let parents know how important volunteer support is to the school in general and to the individual children in the school. Parents are interested in knowing about programs that cannot be started, sustained, or grown without their help. Also let parents know about the benefits of volunteering – it can be an opportunity to meet new friends, to network, to see what really goes on in the school, to learn new things, and to gain a sense of accomplishment. Some schools offer workshops for volunteers on reading with children at home, handling behavioural issues, or basic computer skills.

**2. Be specific about the needs of the school.** A clear purpose and description of the various volunteer opportunities is important so that volunteers are aware of exactly what they will be doing and how long it will take. Volunteers need to know that they will not be waiting around or looking for something to do. A clear description of a variety of positions allows volunteers to make choices about where they would feel most comfortable donating their time, energy, and expertise.

**3. Be flexible.** Not all parents can volunteer on a regular basis. Those who do shift work, or whose work is seasonal, are often willing to volunteer when they can – every other week, in the fall only, when their partner is not working, etc. It is important to acknowledge this and to find ways to encourage their participation. Some parents are willing to volunteer for short periods before or after dropping off or picking up their own children. They can help with start-of-the-day routines or end-of-the-day activities, safe-arrival programs, and many other activities that require a regular, short commitment.

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**4. Be active.** Start a volunteer recruitment campaign at the orientation sessions for new parents – even before their children arrive at school. Mention school volunteer needs and the benefits. Introduce the volunteer coordinator at all curriculum nights, reporting sessions, and PTA meetings throughout the year. Talk about the specific contributions of the previous year’s volunteer group – in program support, in estimated hours of work, even in financial terms (the number of hours contributed multiplied by a reasonable wage; see Monitoring and evaluation, p. 22). Include a volunteer section in every issue of the school newsletter – what’s happening, what’s needed, etc. Have a bulletin board about or for volunteers in the school foyer or office.

**5. Think “outside the box.”** Volunteers do not have to be parents. Many schools are now recruiting seniors and young adults (17-24) who may have the time and interest. Students at the junior high or middle school level, as well as high school students, can also volunteer, for example, as “learning buddies.” In some cases, volunteering can be part of a school requirement for community service hours. Again, being specific about needs and the volunteer positions is important.

**6. Coordinate efforts.** It can be upsetting when one person is asked to volunteer several times and others who have offered to help are never asked. Designate appropriate people to coordinate requests for volunteers in the classroom, in the school, and in special programs. For example, do classroom teachers recruit their own parent or homeroom representative or is it done by the volunteer coordinator or through the office? Who finds the volunteers for the “Spring Fling”?

**7. Harness the power of personal connections.**

Some people are intimidated by schools and do not feel comfortable coming in to volunteer on their own. Having each volunteer recruit one new volunteer and be a “buddy” for new recruits can relieve anxiety. Asking directly is very powerful. If the school principal or volunteer coordinator is made aware of a person or a group who might be interested in helping out, then a phone call or a personal visit inviting their participation may allow them to ask any questions they have and to make a decision. Feature short stories about or by specific volunteers (with their permission) in your newsletters or on bulletin boards. Their testimonials can be very influential in encouraging others.

**8. Use technology.** As more and more parents and community members are using computer technology as part of their daily lives, schools have more opportunities to connect with potential volunteers through e-mail and school Web sites. Include a volunteer needs section on school and classroom websites.

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## Screening, orienting, and training volunteers

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Both parents and school principals agree that screening, orienting, and training volunteers is important. Parents and community members feel less nervous when they know just what is expected of them. They also do a better job with some training. Therefore, orienting volunteers to school rules, routines, and personnel prior to the event or project makes good sense. It is the commitment of teachers and administrators to providing what is needed that is the determining factor in making screening, orientation, and training a success.

### Screening volunteers

The screening of school volunteers must align with school board policy. However, the following are a few strategies to make this as efficient and effective as possible:

1. Make paperwork as easy as possible. When formal applications have to be filled out (i.e., child abuse registry, criminal records check, etc.):
  - have applications readily available in the school office;
  - provide help for parents who need assistance filling out the forms; and
  - if permitted by your district, gather forms and send them to their final destination for applicants.
2. Try to make the process as efficient as possible by ensuring the school community (parents, teachers, staff, community members) is familiar with the purpose of screening.
  - Inform all stakeholders of the screening policy in easily understood, lay terms. Provide written copies that can be obtained in the school office, post a copy on various bulletin boards throughout the school, and upload the information onto the school website, and periodically put it in the school newsletter.
  - Include the origin of the policy in any documents that are developed. Explain that it is a school or district policy. Parents are often reassured when they know where the policy originated and that the policy is uniform across school districts or is also in force in other provinces.
  - It is important to be clear about the purpose of the policy and who it applies to, i.e. whether it is for all volunteers, or a particular group of volunteers.
  - Designate someone on staff to answer questions about screening. It is important to designate one or two staff members who have been adequately briefed on the policy and procedures so as to maintain a consistency of response. These individuals should be reachable by phone or in person. Some schools designate the vice principal and school counsellor for this job. In smaller schools it is usually the principal and one or two classroom teachers.
  - Compile a sheet of frequently asked questions. This will be of help to staff as well as potential volunteers. It can be an active

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list that is added to when new questions are posed.

- Provide opportunities to introduce the screening policy and re-visit it during home and school association meetings, school advisory council meetings, and staff meetings, particularly at the beginning of the school year.
- Incorporate the policy and procedures into school and staff handbooks.

Although these suggestions require some work at the outset, once implemented they are self-sustaining and will prove to be time-savers in the long run.

## Orienting volunteers

The more comfortable potential volunteers are with the school building and its people and routines, the more likely it is that their volunteer experience will be a favourable one. Here are a few strategies some principals have used to orient volunteers:

**1. Develop a school handbook.** Handbooks allow schools to have information pertaining to parent volunteers in one place that is easily accessible to volunteers and staff (see Appendix B for the components of a volunteer handbook). In lieu of a handbook, make information available in other accessible print materials for easy reference. This should include a map of the school with locations of the washrooms, work rooms, cafeteria, etc. and should inform parents of the operation times of the school, areas where volunteers may go when they are not working, and confidentiality expectations (e.g., the importance of not discussing students or staff with those outside the school). See Appendix C (p. 33) for sample guidelines for volunteers.

**2. Partner with the existing home and school organization.** Suggest that there be an orientation committee established by the home and school association. This committee, composed of home and school association members, would be responsible for giving guided tours of the school and for informing parents of the type of help they may be called upon to give. The home and school association is a perfect partner because it is directly involved with the school and has members who are already volunteers and who are in the school regularly. Ask that the orientation committee become a standing committee of the home and school association. Help the committee to develop a 'script' of key points that it should pass on to newcomers.

**3. Recruit and make use of student ambassadors.** Students make excellent tour guides. With a little coaching, they can do an excellent job of orienting volunteers to the school. In most schools, student ambassadors are recruited from the highest grade in the school. This gives these students a leadership role for which they receive recognition, not only from the staff but from the home and school association as well.

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## Training volunteers

No matter what the job, the way to keep parents involved and feeling confident about their volunteer efforts is to provide training. Schools that conduct training do so in a variety of ways, both informal and formal. Variety is the key. Here are some training suggestions:

- 1. Keep training sessions focused and on topic.** Keep to the time allotted. Remember, you want volunteers to look forward to training, not see it as an ordeal.
- 2. Make sure that the training suits the volunteer position.** For example, field trip chaperones may only have to attend a one-hour training session, but literacy tutors may need a series of sessions.
- 3. Assume nothing.** No matter how ordinary the task, make sure volunteers understand exactly what is expected of them. Also explain where they will work, where they can find materials, and who to ask if they have a question, etc.
- 4. Advertise training sessions and make them open to anyone who is interested, no strings attached.** Sometimes parents want to see what a task entails before making a commitment. Allowing anyone who is interested to attend training helps to build confidence. It also allows potential volunteers whose schedules may not allow them to help out on a regular basis to learn more about what they can do when they are free to volunteer.
- 5. Have a volunteer training workshop for staff.** Discuss the tasks that volunteers might do and the type of training that is necessary. Develop a set of overhead slides for use during some of the volunteer training workshops. Have teachers role-play at leading a session. A workshop for staff can make use of the expertise of seasoned staff and develop confidence in new or hesitant staff. It also ensures consistency of information: it is important for all staff to be familiar with the information that is given to volunteers.
- 6. Seek staff volunteers to conduct specific workshops.** Often a teacher with experience in a particular area can lead the training (e.g., the physical education teacher can train activity program volunteers and the resource teacher can train literacy tutors.
- 7. Repeat training sessions periodically.** In this way, families new to the area or potential volunteers who missed the first round have the opportunity to learn. This also allows you to rotate volunteers or shorten time commitments, thereby avoiding volunteer burnout.
- 8. Partner with the existing home and school association to recruit training workshop facilitators.** When staff and experienced volunteers facilitate sessions together, the sessions are often more engaging and informative for potential volunteers.

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## Communicating with and about volunteers

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### Communicating with volunteers

Along with all other aspects of school life, it is important for schools and school districts to communicate clearly and often with volunteers.

Sometimes this gets lost in the business of the school year. However, in schools that make the time to communicate, a little goes a long way. Here are some ways you can communicate with your volunteers:

- **Newsletters:** Devote a column in the school newsletter to volunteer news. This column should be short and can advertise upcoming workshops, expressions of thanks following an activity, and volunteer success stories. It can also be the place to make a pitch for volunteers for specific tasks and to talk about what research says about the benefits of volunteerism (See p. 2).
- **Local media:** Radio and television stations often allocate time and space to announcing upcoming events, cancellations, and general news from schools and community groups. They can provide another venue for keeping the public informed about volunteer news.
- **Regular check-ins:** Remind staff of the importance of checking in with volunteers to see how things are going. Not only can this serve as a form of “troubleshooting”, but volunteers will feel more confident and appreciated if they know that they are supported through regular contact. A telephone call, a brief encounter in the hall, an e-mail, or a short note takes but a moment of time yet sends the message that the school values volunteer help.
- **Volunteer feedback surveys:** Ask volunteers to respond to a short feedback survey that will help gauge the level of volunteer satisfaction. These surveys can also provide helpful information for making volunteer experiences more satisfying and effective in the future.
- **Internet:** The Internet can be a valuable tool for communicating with volunteers about everything from up-coming opportunities to cancellations. E-mail is a quick, easy, and effective way to keep in touch. Create a place on registration forms where volunteers can indicate if they wish to be contacted by e-mail and can provide their e-mail address. If the school has a Web page, a section can be created on it to spotlight volunteer efforts and opportunities. Any and all information that is in print form can be up-loaded into this section. Be sure the URL for the site is widely distributed on community bulletin boards and in the school.
- **School calendar:** Schools that have a monthly school calendar can add reminders to the first or last day of the month to prompt staff to check in with volunteers.
- **Informal conversations with staff and volunteers:** An effective way to keep in touch with staff and volunteers is through direct contact. Dropping by classrooms before or after school when children are not present and spending some time in the staff room are good ways to find out how staff view the volunteer program. Some school administrators make a point of randomly contacting 4-8 volunteers each month. Others use the times when children are being dropped off or picked up to check in with parents about how they are enjoying their volunteer experience

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or to attempt to recruit new volunteers. Being approached by the principal or vice principal is often enough to cause the parent to consider the request.

## Communicating about volunteers

Find opportunities to share information about volunteer programs and practices that are working well. Here are some ways you can communicate about your volunteers:

- **Media coverage:** Seek out opportunities for media coverage. This gives well-deserved recognition to volunteers and staff and also serves to promote recruitment of new volunteers. Local newspapers often appreciate receiving a short article about local school news. Include a photograph with the article. School newsletter articles about volunteer projects can be readily adapted for local newspapers. Be sure to provide a “camera-ready” article. This increases the chances that the article will be published because the local newspaper doesn’t have to do anything except place the article into the paper.
- **Regular updates:** Take time at staff meetings to do an update on successful volunteer initiatives.
- **Spread the word:** Ask for time at administrators’ meetings, school board meetings, home and school association meetings, and other community organization meetings to spread the word about your volunteer program and what it is accomplishing. This can generate enthusiasm and spark new ideas and initiatives.
- **Professional development:** Schools and school districts should consider offering professional development sessions for staff and volunteers. Topics could include an introduction to school volunteerism, how to set up a viable volunteer program, how to conduct workshops for volunteers, etc. School district personnel can be very helpful in initiating and organizing these sessions.
- **Create networks:** The Internet provides a quick and easy way to network with colleagues and community groups (e.g., the public library, the local Lions Club, the local Legion, and other service groups). Establish a listserv<sup>3</sup> for those who are interested in discussing issues relating to volunteering, the challenges to recruitment, volunteer training, and other concerns about volunteer programs. It is always a good idea to establish ground rules for the operation of the listserv so that members maintain appropriate decorum when responding. Be clear about appropriate language and content in order to avoid personal attacks and to safeguard confidential information.
- **Suggestion box:** Put out a suggestion box and invite volunteers to share ideas, give feedback, or raise issues. Provide small sheets of paper and writing instruments and locate the box in a convenient spot, perhaps on the counter in the school office or in the staff room (if appropriate) or in an area that volunteers frequent.

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<sup>3</sup> A listserv is a computer program that maintains lists of e-mail addresses so that everyone on the list can participate in electronic discussions or conferences.



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## Appreciating and valuing volunteers

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Just as recruitment is an on-going activity, so is appreciation of volunteers. While it is enjoyable to have special celebrations dedicated to publicly appreciating volunteers each year, the most valued appreciation comes from daily positive comments of staff and students for a job well done or an effort made. Your efforts as a school tell volunteers how much you value their contributions. Here are some suggestions:

- **Treat volunteers with respect.** If there are a large number of volunteers, suggest they have name tags so that all staff and students can call them by name. Make sure they are greeted or spoken to each time they come into the school. Use the P.A. system to greet or thank volunteers each day as part of the daily announcements.
- **Offer learning opportunities for volunteers.** Seek input from parents regarding topics of interest (e.g., how to help children with their homework, dealing with behavioural issues, how to use e-mail, etc.; see the screening, orienting, and training section, p. 16)
- **Develop supports for volunteers so that they can carry out their tasks as comfortably and easily as possible.** Having clear targets and volunteer position descriptions helps volunteers know what is expected of them. Making sure that volunteers know where they can hang their coat, eat lunch, park, use a washroom, etc. allows them to feel that they are an important part of the school environment. Where possible, some schools have set up special places such as a volunteer lounge for volunteers to work, meet, breastfeed an infant, or just have coffee. You can also use volunteer handbooks, folders, or a spot on the school Web site dedicated to volunteers with useful information see the volunteer handbook in Appendix B (p. 32) for suggestions.
- **Provide the whole school community with information about the volunteer activities in your school.** Use newsletters and bulletin boards and regular reports to the parent-teacher association (PTA) or school advisory council (SAC) meetings to talk about the important contribution that volunteers are making both in the school and off site. Send a brief article to the local community newspaper about the contribution of your volunteers. Show that the school is proud of the involvement of volunteers by making sure that your school board member is aware of all the ways that volunteers are supporting the school. Consider putting a thank-you poster on the community bulletin board at the local grocery store or in the church vestibule.
- **Give specific, positive feedback to each volunteer at least once during the year.** This can be done by a note, an e-mail, a telephone call, or a thank-you card (either purchased or made by students). This feedback can be from the volunteer coordinator, the school administration, the teacher, and the student, or the class that is receiving help from the volunteer.
- **Celebrate volunteers at various times.** Not all volunteers are free at the same times. Invite volunteers who work traditional hours to a “Muffin Morning” at 7:30 am; they can drop in for a coffee and muffin on their way to work. This is also a

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great way to thank volunteers who work off-site. Include a song, a poem, or speech dedicated to volunteers, as part of a larger school event, such as a concert or fundraising activity. Have the students who participate in the school breakfast program make and serve breakfast for the breakfast program volunteers.

- **Organize special events.** Hold a volunteer tea, dinner, BBQ, a volunteer appreciation night or week, or student performances.
- **Distribute tokens of appreciation.** Give small gifts or tokens that are purchased or made by the students. Local businesses may be glad to help with such gifts. Certificates are also appropriate to give to volunteers.
- **Be aware that not everyone is able to volunteer.** Being unable to volunteer at or for a school can be a source of stress or concern for some families. Let parents know that there are many valuable ways to support the school besides volunteering directly (e.g., they can help students at home, make sure students are ready and equipped for school, support fundraising drives, etc.).
- **Advertise.** If your local radio or television station, newspaper, school board, or community organization is celebrating volunteers and volunteerism, be sure to offer the names and activities of your school's volunteers.

## Monitoring and evaluation

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As noted in the review of the literature, research related to improving schools shows that parent and community involvement in schools has a positive effect on student learning. Ongoing monitoring and evaluation is central to school improvement initiatives. Therefore, schools should regularly **evaluate** school volunteerism initiatives. Here are some quantitative and qualitative approaches to monitoring and evaluating programs:

- **Keep records** of the number and types of volunteers in the school and analyze these periodically. Such analyses can be helpful when making changes in the program. For example, this information can help in monitoring the effectiveness of new recruitment strategies. It can also be shared with staff and the community through reports at parent-teacher meetings, in the school newsletter, or on the school Web site. Information on the numbers of and types of volunteers can help you estimate the value-added contribution of volunteers: you can relate the number of hours and type of activity to current wage rates for comparable paid jobs. (For information on how to do this, see the *Volunteer Value Calculator* at <http://www.kdc-cdc.ca/vvc/eng/default.asp>, Imagine Canada, 2005).
- **Collect** examples of the school's written communication related to school volunteerism. Analyze the content and frequency of these communications. Is there a need for changes or improvements?

- **Develop short surveys or questionnaires** to gather feedback from parents, community members, and teachers about the program and to get volunteers' feedback on issues such as communication, training, and logistics. These surveys could be included as a tear-off section in the school newsletter or added to the school's Web site. The school administrator, volunteer coordinator, or those who supervise volunteers for specific activities should design these surveys or questionnaires.
- **Interact informally** with volunteers to monitor their satisfaction and to seek input on ways to improve the program. Principals should consider including the school volunteer program as a regular item on staff meeting agendas and should ask for regular feedback and suggestions from staff.
- **Ask students** who are involved with volunteers to provide feedback on how volunteers are helping them and how the program could be better. Analyze and summarize these responses to monitor the benefits and share the responses with staff and parents.

It is also important for schools to make **evaluation of the volunteers** part of their volunteer programs (See Appendix D (p. 37) for an example of an evaluation form). This evaluation, for the most part, will take the form of regular feedback to volunteers about their work. For evaluation to be effective and productive, both the school and volunteers need to be clear about what is expected of volunteers. Regular feedback is also an important means of recognizing and valuing volunteers. It is also essential when there is a need to address problems with a volunteer's performance in a

timely and constructive manner. Evaluation can take place in the following ways:

- **One-to-one meetings** with volunteers in which the supervisor provides feedback and suggestions. These can be either short, informal interactions that take place while the volunteer is engaged in activities or more formal meetings that are scheduled periodically.
- **Written feedback** in the form of a note can identify positive contributions or make suggestions about ways to improve.
- **A checklist** of ideal volunteer qualities can describe specifics related to positive volunteer behavior, for example, reliability, confidentiality, punctuality, rapport with students and staff, etc. This can be used to evaluate the volunteer by checking off the attributes that a particular volunteer demonstrates or to rate his/her performance. The checklist can be based on the communication sample, guidelines for volunteers, that is in Appendix C, p.33.
- **Acknowledgement of special contributions** can be done through oral or written communication or public recognition.

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## Increasing access for volunteers

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Just as schools are concerned with equity, fairness, and providing equal opportunity for all their students, access should also be kept in mind when finding opportunities for volunteers to participate. Here are some ways to broaden the base of potential volunteers:

- **Expand the range of volunteer opportunities.** Offer a wide variety of volunteer opportunities, both large and small. Look for ways to keep scheduling flexible. Be sure to have tasks that require different levels of time commitment. Try to rotate volunteers to avoid burnout. It is often easier to ask more from volunteers who are already in the building than it is to seek out someone new, but actively seeking the help of new people is the best way to broaden your regular volunteer base. (For a list of possible tasks for volunteers, see Volunteer opportunities, p.12). Consider including tasks that require off-site support, i.e., that can be done in the volunteers' homes or at their place of work. Materials can often be sent home with a volunteer's child or with a staff member, neighbour, or relative.
- **Organize transportation.** Transportation can be a big issue for volunteers in rural areas. Partner with the home and school association or with a local service group such as the Women's Institute, Lions Club, Canadian Legion Clubs, etc. Often these groups are willing to help schools organize rides for those who need them. Once a partner has agreed to undertake the project, the school should set up a database to keep track of who needs transportation and who is willing to provide it.
- **Provide child care.** Older children who have taken an approved babysitting course (e.g., the Red Cross babysitting course) can be enlisted as babysitters. For some volunteer activities, volunteers' children can be engaged in board games, cards, crafts, etc. in the same or adjoining rooms under the supervision of older students with babysitting experience. Some schools charge a minimal fee (\$2.00 - \$3.00), which is then divided among the babysitters. It is always a good idea to have an adult present at all times and to limit the total number of children who are being looked after at one time.
- **Allow children to accompany parents.** There are times when children can accompany their parents and help with a small aspect of the volunteer task. This is a good training ground for future volunteers and solves the volunteers' problem of having to pay for a sitter or make special arrangements for their children. Children can help hang decorations, colour posters, cut, collate, staple, carry, and sort all kinds of items in preparation for Spring Fairs, Holiday Bazaars, or any number of activities. It is important, however, that volunteers understand there may be times when children cannot accompany them, such as on class field trips or when working in classrooms during the school day.

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## Concluding thoughts

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- **Consider other age groups.** Youth and seniors are two groups of prospective volunteers who are often overlooked. Get your volunteer message out to community organizations such as church groups, service groups, and youth groups, and to high schools, several times during the year. Make presentations to these groups and explain the types of support that are needed. Help can be enlisted through senior care facilities: small sewing or knitting projects, or reading books on tape are a few of the tasks some seniors can easily take on. Materials can often be dropped off and picked up once tasks are completed.
- **Implement a buddy system.** Providing volunteer buddies or mentors can make the volunteer experience enjoyable, especially for new or first-time volunteers. Buddies can be recruited from among your more experienced volunteers and can help with orientation, pass on valuable tips, and answer questions as they arise. Buddies do not have to work in the same room or on the same project, but it helps if they are scheduled to be in the school, even briefly, at the same time. Buddies can help to increase the confidence of new volunteers and help experienced volunteers feel that their contributions are valued. Home and school groups are often asked to partner in buddy programs.

In the process of carrying out this research, we experienced some of the barriers and difficulties that schools often experience when recruiting and sustaining volunteers. Focus groups were sometimes poorly attended due to participants' time constraints, the unavailability of child care, the weather, or transportation issues. In addition, no senior school board administrators responded to our survey. This lack of participation suggests that there is no coordinator at the district level in any of the rural school boards who is responsible for volunteers. The research, however, suggests that coordination at this level is essential to supporting and maintaining school volunteers (see p. 8). Despite these obstacles, we employed a variety of strategies (e.g., one-on-one meetings, telephone interviews, e-mail correspondence, and extended deadlines for returning surveys) that expanded opportunities for input beyond the survey and focus groups and allowed for greater involvement and richer qualitative data.

Upon reflecting on the data we gathered, 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.

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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.

Many of these recommendations which are supported by the literature on school volunteerism, are applicable in both rural and urban contexts. The task, however, may seem even more daunting in rural schools where teachers and administrators are already involved with provincial and district education initiatives and the geographic areas from which volunteers come is more spread out. This is why it is important for efforts to be school-based and yet supported at the district level. It is also important for schools to think “outside the box” and implement a variety of activities and initiatives for which parents and community members can volunteer.

As with any form of education initiative, a carefully implemented, well-paced, and well-organized program to improve and increase volunteerism in schools can, in the long run, ease some of the burden that rural schools are feeling. In addition, when parents are seen as partners in the education process, important and lasting relationships are forged that support the goals of the entire school community.

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## Appendix A: Spotlight on promising practices

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### The special friends initiative

Partnerships with community groups can be an effective way for schools to increase their pool of volunteers. At the same time, participation in school volunteer projects can be a rewarding experience for volunteers. Special Friends is one such program.

Special Friends began as a project of a local rural community branch of the Women's Institute, in partnership with a local elementary school. Elementary students are paired with mentors from the community who share their talents and expertise for approximately thirty minutes per week. Special Friends is not intended to be a tutoring program; rather, it asks mentors to find ways to extend and enrich a child's life and experience. For that reason, children are selected to participate based on their personal interests and circumstances, e.g., the middle child in the family who is in need of some attention that perhaps the family is unable to provide at this time, the child who has lost a sibling or close family member, the child who has a talent or interest that is not able to be supported due to family circumstances, etc.

The program is overseen by the Women's Institute and the school guidance counselor. The Women's Institute helps locate potential mentors and schedules the volunteers. The guidance counselor introduces the program at a home and school association meeting in the fall and has an orientation meeting with volunteers. The guidance counselor also assists with the selection of students and insures that criminal records and child abuse registry checks are done and parent permission is sought.

In an effort to keep the program at a manageable level, only 15 students at a time out of a school population of 300 are selected to participate in the mentoring program. This is so that volunteers will not be overtaxed and there will be ample space in the school for mentoring activities to take place. Mentors find the Special Friends program very rewarding. Volunteers who have participated include a tractor dealership owner, a retired teacher, a cook, a symphony musician, a teddy bear crafter, a boat builder, and a bank manager, among many others.

Once organized, the program seems to run itself. A key to its success is the commitment of the mentors. They seldom cancel or fail to show up. If mentors have to cancel their appointment with a child, they call the child at the school or drop by to let them know. The children look forward to their mentors' visits.

This initiative has received a Nova Scotia Education Week Award for Excellence.

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## The school advisory council committee approach

Sometimes schools are able to take advantage of an existing structure in order to manage and organize school volunteer efforts. One such structure that already exists in most schools is the School Advisory Council.

In one rural school, a detailed structure for school volunteer programs was established under the auspices of the School Advisory Council. Each member of the Council is asked to take responsibility for a committee that oversees a program or activity at the school. In this case, an Advisory Council member, who be either a parent or community member, chairs the Parent Volunteer Committee and thus provides a ready link to the School Advisory Council.

One of the mandates of the Parent Volunteer Committee is to maintain a database of volunteer opportunities and names of individuals who wish to volunteer and what they would like to do. Early in the school year, as part of the annual School Open House, parents are provided with an extensive list of activities with which they can be involved. Parents are also given a form to fill in on which they are asked to indicate how they can help. The information on the form is put into a spread sheet and made available to teachers, community groups, the School Advisory Council, etc. Over time, the database has become quite extensive.

The Parent Volunteer Committee also attends local town council meetings and keeps the council abreast of school activities and volunteer opportunities. Being an official committee of the School Advisory Council gives the Parent Volunteer Committee more credibility and serves to keep the town council informed of school needs while also reaching out to the wider community for volunteers. It is a win-win situation.

A key to the success of this committee is the involvement of the school principal. As member of the School Advisory Council, the principal is able to take an active role in encouraging and supporting the chair of the Parent Volunteer Committee.

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## Appendix B: Volunteer handbook

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The following items should be included in a school volunteer handbook (paper or Web version):

<b>A cover or home page:</b>
Include the school name, address, and telephone number; the names of the principal, vice principal, and secretary, with their telephone numbers and e-mail addresses; the school hours; and any school logo or motto.
<b>An introduction:</b>
Messages from the principal (see Appendix C for a sample principal's message, p. 34), the chair of the Parent/Teacher Association chair and / or the School Advisory Council, and testimonials from volunteers.
<b>Basic information:</b>
Identify who coordinates the school's volunteer program, with that person's name and contact information. Provide a clear description of each of the regular tasks that volunteers do at the school (include the responsibilities, the length of commitment, the time of day, etc.). List possible off-site volunteer opportunities. Provide information on how to volunteer, and ask for suggestions for new volunteer possibilities. Include a map of the school (all floors) with teacher and their classrooms labelled as well as special areas like the cafeteria, gymnasium, sickroom, washrooms, parking, lunch facilities, any special areas for them to work or relax. Tell volunteers where they should report when they arrive at the school.
<b>Relevant school and school board policies and procedures:</b>
Include either the policy itself or a summary and where the actual policy can be found (See Screening, orienting, and training volunteers, p. 16). Schools may choose to include a set of guidelines for volunteers in this section (See Appendix C for sample guidelines, p. 33).
<b>Calendar of events:</b>
Include a calendar of events, especially those that may affect a volunteer's participation – orientation sessions, assessment periods, school in-service days or holidays, fundraising campaigns, planned volunteer appreciation events, etc.
<b>Additional Handbook Ideas</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• <b>Include a photo collage</b> of volunteers from past years.</li><li>• <b>Approach local community business for financial support</b> for printing or Web upkeep.</li></ul>
<b>School volunteer handbook websites that provide samples:</b>
San Francisco School Volunteers: <a href="http://www.sfsv.org">www.sfsv.org</a> Paradise Elementary School Volunteer Handbook: <a href="http://www.paradise.k12.nf.ca/volunteer.html">http://www.paradise.k12.nf.ca/volunteer.html</a> The Hamptons School Volunteer Handbook: <a href="http://schools.cbe.ab.ca/b389/pdf/Volunteer%20Handbook.pdf">http://schools.cbe.ab.ca/b389/pdf/Volunteer%20Handbook.pdf</a>

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## Appendix C: Communication samples

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### Guidelines for volunteers

Guidelines for volunteers, which are sometimes also referred to as volunteer responsibilities or a volunteer code of ethics, should be drawn up in accordance with existing school policies. Here are some guidelines to consider including:

Volunteers should:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• respect the confidentiality of students, staff, and school records, and refrain from discussing them outside the school situation;</li><li>• respect the professional judgment of the teacher;</li><li>• take any questions or concerns directly to the supervising teacher, volunteer coordinator, or school administration;</li><li>• be punctual and dependable, and notify the school know as soon as possible when unable to meet commitments;</li><li>• know and observe the school regulations;</li><li>• let staff handle all discipline;</li><li>• ask for direction, clarification, or support when needed;</li><li>• participate in workshops or meeting for volunteers; and</li><li>• recognize the importance of being a role model for students in behaviour, speech and dress.</li></ul>

## **NOVA ELEMENTARY SCHOOL**

Dear Parents:

Welcome to Nova Elementary! A strength of our school is the close relationship we have between staff, students, parents, and community volunteers who work on behalf of our students both on-site and off. I am hoping that as a new member of our school community, you, too, will want to get involved!

There are many opportunities to volunteer. Whether you have only a small amount of time to donate, or you can come regularly each week, or there are only certain times of the year when you have time, we are always seeking volunteers to help with a variety of tasks. We encourage the participation not only of parents but also of other community members (family members, retirees, and young adults from the area) who are interested in volunteering.

We recognize that some volunteers may find it difficult to work on site. Not to worry! If you are able to come to the school, we have many interesting projects that can be done from your home.

Our volunteers make an important contribution to our school. For example, this summer, we completed a rebuild of our fantastic Funground (playground) in five days! This was all done with volunteer help from our valley families and county citizens. We also have a number of volunteers who are involved with literacy and math support under the guidance of our Resource Department. Volunteers also help with fundraising for materials for special activities, as well as in our classrooms or with school-wide enrichment activities, field trips, and many other programs and initiatives.

We provide orientation for all volunteers and short training sessions for some programs. Our volunteers have found their experiences with Nova Elementary School to be enjoyable and rewarding. In addition to providing support for our students and programs, volunteers have the opportunity to see first hand the depth and dimensions of our programs, get a sense of belonging to our educational team, and meet other volunteers from the community.

I hope that you will consider filling out the attached information form indicating how you might volunteer at Nova Elementary. If you are interested in talking to me about this further, please call my office (902-668-3282).

Thank you for your continued support. I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

Heather Price, Principal

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## Appendix C: Sample items for inclusions in the monthly school newsletter

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### Beginning of the year

Volunteers with our school are an important part of our educational team. Last year, we had volunteers working in the buddy reading program, as classroom parents, as chaperones for field trips, setting up and maintaining our school garden, fundraising to purchase new technology and so much more. In total, the community provided more than 1200 volunteer hours. Even at minimum wage, that translates into more than \$7500! You can see how important your volunteer contributions are to the everyday running and enrichment of our school programs. If you would like to read, listen, cut, colour, organize, bake, sell or buy, build, garden, sing, or talk, we have a job for you.

### Monthly spotlight

This month we are featuring one of our Primary Reading Buddy program volunteers, Ms. Carrie Jones. For the past three years, since her first daughter, Melinda, started school, Carrie has volunteered two mornings a week with primary students. As a primary reading buddy, it is Carrie's job to read stories to small groups or to individual children and to listen as they read to her. Our students particularly love to hear the various voices Carrie uses to bring the stories to life, and she is often rewarded by special pictures from our young artists. Given her interest in drama, it is not surprising that Carrie is once again working with Ms. Marshall, the grade 5 teacher, in putting on a spring musical. When asked what she liked best about volunteering at our school, Carrie said, "I get a chance to see and understand how and why things are different in school today. I feel like I learn as much as they do – with them and from them."

We want to take this opportunity to thank Carrie Jones individually for all the ways she supports our school and to thank all the primary reading buddy volunteers for the important work they do in supporting the youngest members of our school as they learn to read. If you are interested in volunteering with this or any other program, please call or e-mail Mr. MacIntosh, our volunteer coordinator, at [macmacmac@anyschool.ca](mailto:macmacmac@anyschool.ca)

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## Appendix C: Sample agenda for orientation session

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### Volunteer orientation session

Any School

Date and location

#### 1. Welcome from school principal

This message should be positive and inviting. It should emphasize how much the school values the participation of parents and community members and how much it benefits from the volunteer program. The principal can also tell volunteers a bit about the school.

#### 2. Welcome from students

If at all possible, include students in the orientation. They can talk about their experiences with volunteers and/or present some kind of welcoming performance (e.g., sing a few songs, do a reading).

#### 3. How volunteers help in our school

Describe some of the ways that volunteers are helping in the school and explain existing volunteer opportunities.

#### 4. Expectations

- Explain what the school expects from volunteers.
- Explain what volunteers can expect from the school.

#### 5. The volunteer handbook

If the school has a volunteer handbook, introduce it to participants. Involve participants in small-group activities designed to familiarize them with the contents. For example, each small group might be asked to read a short section of the handbook and discuss it and then share their discussion with the larger group. Or the small groups could be reconstituted with at least one representative from each of the original groups in each new group. The representatives then would share highlights of the sections of the handbook that they read. The session would end with large group debriefing during which the workshop facilitator would respond to questions and ensure that all the most important information had been discussed. If the school does not have a handbook, distribute and discuss written volunteer guidelines.

#### 6. Tips from experienced volunteers

It can be very encouraging to new volunteers to hear from more experienced peers who can talk about their experiences and offer helpful suggestions.

#### 7. Refreshments and Informal Interactions

This is a very important part of the orientation during which staff and experienced volunteers make new volunteers feel comfortable and welcome.



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## Appendix D: Sample evaluation forms

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### Volunteer self-evaluation

To the volunteer:

Reflecting on strengths and areas needing improvement is an important part of our volunteer program at \_\_\_\_\_ school. Please take a few minutes to complete this self-evaluation related to your volunteer activities. Please answer yes or no to each question.

### Meeting expectations

\_\_\_ When I make a commitment to volunteer for an activity, do I fulfill that commitment?

\_\_\_ Am I punctual and do I notify the school when I will be unavoidably late?

\_\_\_ Do I give the school as much advance notice as possible when I am going to be absent?

\_\_\_ Do I maintain confidentiality?

### Communications

\_\_\_ Do I maintain ongoing communication with the supervisor of my volunteer activity?

\_\_\_ When working with students, do I establish good rapport?

\_\_\_ Do I listen to what students have to say?

\_\_\_ Do I address legitimate concerns through agreed upon channels?

\_\_\_ Do I accept feedback and criticism and act upon suggestions?

\_\_\_ Do I offer to help when I see an obvious need?

\_\_\_ Do I avoid criticizing students, teachers, or the school?

### Performance

\_\_\_ Do I follow the instructions and guidelines I am given?

\_\_\_ Do I ask for help when uncertain about an assignment?

\_\_\_ Do I make observations and share information with the supervisor of the volunteer activity?

\_\_\_ Do I take advantage of opportunities for training?

\_\_\_ Do I evaluate myself at intervals?

\_\_\_ Do I ask for feedback from others about my work?

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## Appendix D: School volunteer evaluation checklist (to be filled out by school personnel):

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Reflecting on strengths and areas needing improvement is an important part of our volunteer program at \_\_\_\_\_ school. As the supervisor of a volunteer in our school, you have a role to play in providing feedback to the volunteer. Please complete the following checklist and discuss your observations with the volunteer. Check all items that apply.

Volunteer \_\_\_\_\_ Supervisor \_\_\_\_\_

### Meeting expectations

- Fulfills volunteer commitments according to agreed upon schedule.
- Maintains punctuality
- Notifies school/supervisor in advance of absence.
- Maintains confidentiality.

### Communications

- Establishes and maintains ongoing communication with supervisor.
- Interacts positively with students, teachers, support staff, administrators and other volunteers.
- When working with students individually or in small groups, establishes and maintains good rapport.
- Addresses legitimate concerns through agreed upon channels.
- Accepts feedback and criticism and acts upon suggestions.
- Offers help when sees a need.
- Avoids criticizing students, teachers, or school.

### Performance

- Follows instructions and guidelines.
- Attends training sessions.
- Asks for help when uncertain.
- Makes observations and shares information with supervisor.
- Offers constructive suggestions for improvement.
- Evaluates self at intervals.
- Asks for feedback.





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