

## **Volunteers in Schools – Supporting Quality Teaching**

### ***Setting the Context***

According to a report from the Independent Sector, *Giving and Volunteering in the United States 2001*, approximately 44 percent of American adults volunteer. In the year 2000, an estimated 83.9 million adults formally volunteered approximately 15.5 billion hours – representing the equivalent of more than 9 million full time employees.

The National Parent Teacher Association reports that literally million of dollars in volunteer services are performed each year in public schools. Community involvement has the potential to boost student achievement and studies have concluded that volunteers express greater confidence in schools where they have opportunities to participate regularly. Despite the significance of community these resources, and widespread consensus regarding the potential value of engaging volunteers in schools, limited research is available on the most effective models and practices for volunteers to support teachers and ultimately contribute to student learning.

### ***Using Volunteers – Thoughts from Accomplished Teachers***

In preparation for further modification to the volunteer component of the BellSouth Foundation’s Quality in the Classroom Initiative, we have solicited feedback from accomplished teachers across the Southeast regarding plans for volunteers to support teaching quality.

The Teacher Leaders Network (TLN) is a network of highly accomplished teachers (200 from FL, GA, NC, SC and VA) dedicated to expanding the role of expert teachers in advocating for effective teaching and learning practices. The network combines Internet technology ([www.teacherleaders.org](http://www.teacherleaders.org)), with old-fashioned conferencing to create a professional community able to apply what they know in various leadership settings.

We described the concept of the BellSouth Quality in the Classroom Initiative to these teachers and asked for feedback that would help grantees develop strategies that would empower communities to support teachers and help all students learn. We encouraged participants to be honest about the roles through which volunteers could best serve the school, and asked the teachers to provide authentic knowledge about best practices for integrating (the right kind of) volunteers into their teaching work.

### ***Overarching Themes***

Effective volunteer involvement requires training and development.

Volunteers are not “free.” To use volunteers effectively and enhance teacher quality, schools must make investments in terms of staff time and resources to recruit, train, track and manage the resource.

A “one-size-fits-all” approach to supporting effective volunteer strategies is unlikely to succeed. School setting and location will significantly affect the various structures needed to engage the community.

Volunteers have different skill sets, interests, abilities, and time limitations pre-assessment volunteer surveys can add structure and value to volunteer strategies.

Teachers have different expectations for the role volunteers should play in their classrooms, a pre-assessment process of teachers and volunteers can effectively align teacher needs/expectations with volunteer interests and strengths.

There is a strong need to limit liability concerns and maximize the familiarity and comfort that volunteers have in school settings.

### ***What Teachers Want***

“Offer training sessions jointly to paraprofessionals and community volunteers (“The only difference is that one is paid for their work and one donates their time”). Highly qualified teachers that utilize this pool could be trainers and determine what training would be most valuable to them in their practice.”

“It is very helpful to have ‘help’ that is self directed, free thinking, and to have other adults who know first hand the abilities and challenges of my students and can provide additional input into individual student performance.”

“I think the best use for community volunteers lies in mentoring families of the community. I would like to see Parent University sessions run by parent volunteers for parents that address issues ranging from parenting to schooling...I think that many of the issues that children are struggling with are social issues that take much time away from our planning, grading and collaboration.”

“I think volunteers would be a great asset to students who need extra help, but it seems like those individuals are hard to find. It takes a very special someone, very self-assured and not repulsed by inappropriate behavior.”

“I use parent volunteers almost weekly for various things...I find that having an adult available to ask the right questions to students stimulates their thinking and also helps to keep them focused.”

“I cannot think of bad experiences with parent volunteers except the lack of them. I also think that by opening up my classroom door to parents, I am helping to build confidence in what is happening in our school and in my classroom.”

“When parents and volunteers are in schools doing real tasks and using their own talents/gifts, I think this makes for the best of experiences.”

“I think the more the public can take roles in support of education, the more they will understand what we are dealing with...not the schools they attended, but the schools of today with all their crowds, conflicts, joys, and struggles. We need them as allies as we seek more power to create the schools we believe will better serve all our ‘clients.’”

“I teach in an inclusion classroom where the ESE teacher only visits twice per week for 45 minutes. Therefore I really appreciate the parent and community volunteers that come to my classroom. They provide one-on-one and small group instruction to my ESE students. The resource teachers train the parents, so the parents are somewhat knowledgeable on subject matter and provide lesson plans and activities for low achieving kids.”

“As a special education teacher with a self-contained class, I love having volunteers in the classroom. My students need experience being around other people. They also need to hear instructions or directions in different ways.”

“If schools want the support of the public, then it is essential that we ‘open the doors’ to the school and tap into the resources available within the community...It is so good to know that if I have a need for

help with a special project or activity, all I have to do is make a phone call or send an email and there will be someone to fill that need.”

“Too much valuable teaching time is taken by simple tasks that a volunteer can handle easily.”

### ***Suggestions for Volunteers***

“They all need the same training to be effective. I like to treat them as I would a student teacher. Present info, explain why and how, model and allow them to practice.”

“One way to demystify the school setting is to acclimate folks by immersing them in student interaction. If you have a volunteer who is really reluctant, encourage them to interact with just one student as a reading partner. After a few days of just listening, I’ll take the time to ask a few questions...What happens is they begin to assume an active listening role. You plan probing questions and they’ll be surprised at the amount of information they glean about a student reader just by listening. They’ll become comfortable, confident (which is the key), and be ready to take bigger steps in working with students.”

“Volunteers at my current school seem to want to limit themselves to clerical duties. I am not sure why exactly. We request a volunteer from our coordinator for a specific job. I have put in several times for someone to come and work with students to help them read the directions as they complete computer tasks and no one has accepted the challenge.”

“A lot of volunteers are shocked by the behavior of the children and respond with either over-the-top outrage or are very timid in their approach. Neither response is productive and the teacher ends up with an international incident on his/her hands instead of the desired help for students.”

I do not see volunteers in use IN classrooms anywhere in my building. They do come to run copies of newsletters, stuff envelopes, drop off food for home roll receptions, etc. Parents say their kids don’t want them in the school. ..yet these are the years when parents need to be even more involved and visible [middle school].”

“Some parents at the school are great organizers, and these put their skills to use on large scale events like literary cafes, book fairs and the like.”

“Before allowing the volunteers to jump in with both feet, I always take an interest inventory and find out what the person is ‘really’ good at. I zero in on that skill/talent and whole!” “The secret to good volunteers is to know the individuals’ comfort zone and talents. There’s always something they can do – even if it’s just to sharpen pencils. I always make my volunteers aware of how much I need them and how they’re a vital part of the community, school, student partnerships.”

“In my school there are always so many things that need doing – no matter what the qualifications of a person may be, there is something they can do that will benefit teachers and students. Too much valuable teaching time is taken by simple tasks that a volunteer can handle easily.” And the same idea from another teacher “Again, I think its’ finding their talent. Some were storytellers, some taught the children how to create scrapbooks, how to prepare a meal...I’ve had retired bankers teacher the children how to balance a checkbook, retired geologist teacher the children about rocks. We’ve invited grandparents who’d previously worked at the landfill to accompany us there and act as an unofficial tour guide. The list goes on.”

### ***Necessary Conditions***

“Hearing from neighbors has a completely different feel than hearing from ‘the school’.”

“As far as during the school day or in my classroom, I don’t have much need for volunteers, primarily because the time that it takes to organize volunteers and to coordinate their efforts rarely seems worth it to me. I know that many others do a great job involving volunteers...it’s just something that I never got good at.”

“If a mass training were to be done for volunteers, have a couple of special education teachers present information on how to help in the special ed classroom.”

“The volunteers were not very bright...the simplest tasks could not be accomplished without it becoming a mess. I thought for a long time that it was my directions, but I know now that it was the caliber of the people serving as volunteers.”

“She came in to collect ‘dirt’ to pass around the community about faculty members, discipline – you name it and she was looking for something to make a scandal out of. I had invited her to come in so it fell to me to tell her she couldn’t come back and why. My principal didn’t help at all, but certainly insisted that she had to go. I was very embarrassed and didn’t even think about asking a volunteer for assistance for years.”

“They [volunteers] read to and with students or work as technology tutors. This also worked well. But they need very clear assignments and guidelines if they are in class during schools.”

Need to address liability issues with the potential to prohibit volunteer usage. In one school in NC volunteers could not cover lunch duty to free up free time for teachers because of liability concerns.

### ***Programs that Work or Proposed***

In Florida, one 4<sup>th</sup> grade teacher trained volunteers to give informal assessments, take running records, use multiple teaching and learning strategies for working one on one with at risk students, and how to take notes when working with students. The training allows them to identify student needs as they are working with students the teacher assigns and to make effective choices about what materials to pull.

Retired teachers could come into classrooms and ‘sit in,’ giving teachers feedback on their practice. “Placing these retired teachers in the classroom of experienced teachers would be especially valuable as oftentimes, novice teachers are given more support in terms of observations than experienced teachers.”

“Research shows and supports that one on one reading with guided reading questioning strategies is one of the most effective things in raising student reading levels. However, most schools lack funding and personnel to give at risk students much one on one time.”

In North Carolina, a school uses volunteers as proctors for end of course testing; in the office answering telephones and caring for the attendance office; and during lab experiences as another set of eyes...after knowing safety rules, walk around working to ask and answer questions.

“I use community volunteers in afterschool literacy activities as mentors and tutors. They provide great role models (educationally, culturally and linguistically). They work one on one with kids to help with homework, teach organizational skills, read together, practice math facts, teach technology and art and music and organize sports. The kids love it and the mentors really benefit from the relationship as well.”

Use community volunteers to teach things they are experts at after or during school (Cambodian dance for example).”

Training in an elementary school in Virginia for volunteers on discussing books with children. A chart just inside the classroom with the students’ names and book titles. Volunteers called the next name on the list plus others if some students had read the same book, so they met one-on-one or in small groups, sometimes meeting in the back of the room, other times going to the library or outside in nice weather.

Partnered with local weaving guild providing volunteers for after school weaving club that meets 2 afternoons per week...they faithfully show up and have 25-30 students at each session. Established wonderful relationships with children.

“Scientist in the classroom” small non-profit that matches scientists from business and universities and hobbyists with teachers on a request basis. Database of volunteers and discuss a presentation and schedule with teacher. Schools done a small fee each year to participate. “I had a constant stream of volunteer scientists helping me teach deep content knowledge to my students.”

Volunteer reading partners, coach WRITE volunteers, lunch bunch volunteers (volunteer eat lunch with students and have book discussions) work with ESL if share language, student run literature circle observers, clerical, etc. and special projects where extra hands are needed (cooking, etc). Volunteers are also guest speakers.

Send employees into schools as substitutes so that teachers may attend professional development without the cost of substitutes (done by State Farm), “This also exposes those community members to a day in the teacher’s schools – which hopefully will help with school reform.”