

Research Brief

Securing Volunteers to Fix Up the School

Question: How can schools secure volunteers to help fix up the building and grounds?

In a Nutshell

There isn't much research on how to secure volunteers to participate in school clean-ups and fix-ups, but some key ideas can be found in anecdotal examples from many communities around the nation. The first recommendation is that securing volunteers is easier when the school has a solid, active community relations program in place. If people are familiar with the school and its mission, they are more likely to volunteer when the call goes out for help. Secondly, people are more likely to volunteer if asked to do something specific. Finally, communicating with key groups is likely to build support within the group (e.g., alumni, churches, local businesses, service clubs) to help out. That makes the school an integral part of their public service agenda, and usually puts their volunteer efforts at the school's disposal. For more ideas, read the stories at the conclusion of this brief.

Summary of Findings:

One of the most visible effects of recent budget cuts is the deterioration of a school's physical facilities. Euphemistically referred to as "deferred maintenance," this problem may show up as lack of custodial services or cosmetic improvements, or as serious mechanical or structural failures. It can also be evident in the lack of improvements needed to keep abreast of new curriculum requirements. Problems like antiquated labs or technology, deteriorating athletic facilities, or broken and inoperable equipment can seriously affect the quality of student learning and show up in achievement measures or even dropout rates. As Jonathan Kozol points out so forcefully, the fundamental inequities in American education are showcased most dramatically in the school facilities that house our poorest students – those most in need of all of the resources we can muster to help them succeed and break the cycle of failure and poverty.

While community volunteers probably can't solve major physical plant problems, they can certainly help to maintain a clean, attractive school facility for the students who attend. As with all aspects of school leadership, some thoughtful advance planning will help make a volunteer "clean-up, fix-up" program a regular part of your school's calendar.

What Works?

A careful reading of success stories from diverse communities provides some guidelines for making a volunteer program work.

Recruit Groups. People are more likely to participate in a fix-up project if they do so as part of a group they already know and belong to – such as a church, service club, or other social group. While individuals may not respond to a call for volunteers because they aren't sure if they will know anyone else at the event, they are very likely to join a team of friends or colleagues for a

day of volunteer work at the school. Most people start volunteering for Habitat for Humanity as part of a group, and many then return as individuals to keep working on the houses they have started.

Check Your Contact List. You almost certainly know people in your community – maybe even in your school – who are community leaders in one way or another. The president of a local service club, the chief of the volunteer fire department, the pastor of a local church, or even a government official can provide important entrée into large groups of people who have a sense of community spirit and a willingness to volunteer. Start with them, and get them to help you recruit volunteers.

Include Local Businesses. Local businesses can not only provide volunteers, but may even supply money or materials for school improvements. A local hardware store (or even a corporate giant like Wal-Mart or Home Depot) may have some discretion in making donations of materials or equipment to support a school fix-up project. Even very small towns that have few local businesses are served by businesses in larger, nearby regional town centers or county seats. Your community is an important source of customers for those businesses, so don't overlook them when seeking help. In fact, some businesses may be interested in sponsoring a fix-up event in order to showcase some of their products and get some public relations attention. Pay attention to military bases or other government facilities as a source of volunteers as well.

Find a Community Champion. Find someone, not necessarily connected with the school, who can make your plea to the community. It might be a local government official who can make sure the word gets out at town meetings or other official events, or it could be a local radio DJ or other media figure who can get the attention of large groups of people at one time. In very small towns it might be the local postmaster or proprietor of “the store” who promotes your volunteer program to customers. Word travels fast in small communities, so figure out who can get your message on the local grapevine.

Be Specific and Concrete. Don't ask for volunteers to “fix up the school.” That sounds way too nebulous and a little daunting. Instead, announce that on such-and-such a date “we are looking for volunteers to paint the beat up lockers in school colors. If you can't join us, we are also looking for contributions of paint, brushes, drop cloths, masking tape, or money to purchase these supplies.” When asking for volunteers, make sure there are different things for them to do as part of the project so that everyone is comfortable participating. Also, give a very specific time frame for the volunteer activity (e.g., from 9:00 – noon on Saturday, August 20), and make sure you have all the materials and equipment necessary for the work.

Manage the Project. Be sure that the volunteer project is set up and ready to go when the volunteers show up. There is nothing more irritating to volunteers than standing around waiting for the project to begin because the advance preparation work wasn't done properly. Also, make sure there is a project manager (or managers) who can give directions, answer questions, and provide guidance to the volunteers. Borrowing from Habitat for Humanity once again, there are project leaders, sometimes recruited from the volunteer groups themselves, who serve as “foremen” on the construction project.

Look Close to Home for Help. Student groups, parent groups, even faculty, may be willing to pitch in to work on a project for the school. Add spouses, siblings, and other people who are part of the school's social network, and you may already have the resources you need to complete a significant project. Better yet, turn the project over to one of your school organizations (service clubs, student council) and let them recruit help and run it themselves.

Have a Wish List. When working with volunteers, or when making any kind of public presentation, always have a wish list of specific needs to be addressed in your school. "We'd really like to have a butterfly and hummingbird garden as part of our science program," is better than "we could use some help with our landscaping." It's even better if you can link the wish list to needs that are obvious to the community as well. If the landscaping of the school looks terrible, or the classrooms are dingy, the community already knows it and can see the "need" to do something about it. If a project is linked to the school program or the welfare of the kids, it's even better.

Reciprocate. If other organizations in town need help, be willing to assist them in getting volunteers from your school. If your school has a service requirement, solicit opportunities from local agencies or organizations that may need some energetic, youthful assistance.

Make it A Regular Event. The most successful projects are predictable; people can put them on their calendars and plan around them. A quarterly volunteer Saturday, for example, allows people to get into the habit of helping out. Just be sure that there is always something specific to do, and that they are not so frequent that they become burdensome to the most generous of your volunteers and contributors.

Say Thank You. Look for ways to thank your volunteers. It doesn't have to be a big recognition dinner (which actually takes more time), but maybe an informal barbeque or picnic to end the work day. If the budget allows, or if you can get them donated, a small thank you memento (a logo coffee cup or flash drive) can also help keep the school at the forefront of their attention. (Don't spend too much though; it makes people wonder why you used the money for trinkets rather than paint.) Use the school website to post pictures of the volunteers and how the work they did is being used by the kids or in the school program. In one small Vermont town, students make posters, including pictures, to commemorate the volunteer activity and display them in the post office, general store and at the town transfer station [aka "dump"] – one of the most frequented spots in the township!

The Bottom Line

Volunteer projects are most successful when they are part of a larger, planned community and parent relations program – such as that described in Drake's article on the "Comer Model" below. Also, there are legal and liability issues associated with volunteer programs, especially if the volunteers are working directly with kids. Be sure to check district policy before launching a volunteer program that may place the school in jeopardy of a lawsuit or other legal action.

In some countries, parents and students provide all of the care for the schools' physical plant -- including custodial and maintenance services. While that is probably not feasible (or desirable) in our complicated contemporary society, there is still a spirit of volunteerism in most



communities that has supported American schools for nearly 200 years. With thoughtful planning and judicious recruitment, that spirit can be focused on helping to create positive learning environments for all of our community's children.

Online Resources:

Volunteers Sought to Help Fix Up Schools. *Santa Maria Times*, May 14, 2010.

http://santamariatimes.com/news/local/education/article_29107000-5f20-11df-b303-001cc4c03286.html

Volunteers Pitch In to Fix Up Schools. *Caribbean Business*, August 1, 2011.

http://www.caribbeanbusinesspr.com/news03.php?nt_id=60264&ct_id=1

Our View: Sharefest Builds Community While it Fixes Up Schools. *Rockford Register Star*, June 17, 2010.

<http://www.rrstar.com/opinions/x1600620953/Our-View-Sharefest-builds-community-while-it-fixes-up-schools>

Volunteers Fix Up Balboa Middle School; Education: Employees of Kinko's Northwest join community members and students to clean, coat and cultivate at the homely Ventura campus. *Los Angeles Times*, December 10, 1995. http://articles.latimes.com/1995-12-10/local/me-12566_1_balboa-middle-school

Volunteers Needed: Fix Up Hosford Middle School. *Hosford-Abernethy Neighborhood Development* (Southeast Portland, OR), September 20, 2008. <http://handpdx.org/blog/2008/09/20/volunteers-needed-fix-up-hosford-middle-school/>

Time Magazine, National Service Issue. September 8, 2008.

<http://learnandserve.hhp.ufl.edu/resources/resource%20files/TIME%20Article%20Sept.8.2008.pdf>

Professional Resources:

Beale, A. V. (January, 1985). Toward More Effective Parent Involvement. *The Clearing House*, 58(5). Pp. 213-215. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/30186356>

Drake, D. D. (May-June, 1995). Student Success and the Family: Using the Comer Model for Home-School Connections. *The Clearing House*, 68(5). Pp. 313-316. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/30189092>

Johansen, I. M. (Spring, 1998). Legal Issues in School Volunteer Programs. *School Law Bulletin*. <http://sogpubs.unc.edu/electronicversions/slb/slb98sp1.pdf>

Kozol, J. (1991). *Savage Inequalities*. New York: Crown Publishing.

Kozol, J. (2005). *Shame of the Nation*. New York: Crown Publishing.

National Clearinghouse for Educational Facilities (NCEF). Search for specific topics: rural schools, urban schools, etc. <http://www.ncef.org/>



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