



VALUABLE VOLUNTEERS: How to Find, Use, and Keep Them

By Sue W. McGown

A healthy volunteer program can be a great asset to any school library. We have had a volunteer program for over 24 years where parents assist in almost every area of the school program. Over 45 volunteers work in the library during the school year and they are essential to the library program.

Volunteers do much of the routine work that then frees the librarian to work with students individually or in groups, providing instruction and reading guidance. These extra hands provide the time necessary for librarians to collaborate with teachers in order to plan appropriate lessons for students.

In addition to the physical work volunteers provide, they become strong advocates for a school library program because they learn all we do and how we do it. They understand the process of preparing books for the shelf because they are involved in the many steps. They see how many books are circulating and the excitement of watching students locate books in the library. Some of the volunteers enjoy the work so much, they go on to train to become practicing librarians.

How to Find Volunteers

When creating a volunteer program, it is important to work closely with whatever parent organization is available to the school community. A library volunteer chair who plans and prepares the schedule of library workers is extremely valuable in recruiting, training, and supervising the schedule. In addition, consider ways to advocate for library volunteer opportunities whenever you talk with parents.

If the parent organization sends out a late summer newsletter with general information about the upcoming school year, ask to include a description of volunteer opportunities and forms for sign up. At parent meetings, the library volunteer chair can give a short talk about the opportunities for service in the library and enlist additional volunteers. Be sure to invite fathers, grandparents, and other community members to volunteer, as well as mothers. Then, the library volunteer chair can prepare a schedule for the school year that has consistent volunteer time each week.

“The most important way to keep volunteers is to thank them.”

Pat Smith, Media Specialist, Pomperaug Elementary School, Southbury, Connecticut, says:

Early in May, I ask my current volunteers if they are interested in coming back next year, their preferences for day and time, and if they would be interested in being a substitute when another volunteer cannot come. In mid-May, I set up a time for anyone who might be interested in being a library volunteer to come in and shadow a current volunteer. I suggest times when I know I have a competent volunteer scheduled. I also have elderly community members who help. One helper is a former kindergarten teacher who has been with the school for 20 years and is now in her eighties. She makes bookmarks and helps in a variety of ways. A retired secretary comes in as a volunteer, too.”

Sylvia Jacquard, Library Tech, Coldbrook and District School, Nova Scotia, Canada describes how she uses students as volunteers in her library:

I run an LSA (Library Student Assistant) program that has proven to be very popular and certainly keeps my head above water when it comes to shelving and book processing. Students from grades four to eight are eligible, but I find that most of them are from grades four to six. (I could easily expand the program to grade three as they are keen to join.) Students fill out an application form that must be signed by their teacher. I start with two noon hour-long training periods, which lets them know what’s involved and tends to weed out those who aren’t seriously interested. The remaining students are assigned to one of the noon hours in our six-day cycle in teams of two to three. If they demonstrate their commitment by working for three straight assigned days, then I order an LSA pin for them. These pins are specially made and have the student’s name on them, which is why I have a probationary period first. The pins are much prized by their wearers and useful as they let other students in the library know who they can ask for help and show staff that these students are working for me if I send them on errands to other parts of the school. Although the first job of every noon hour is shelving and book processing, I keep track of what I have each team do otherwise so as to vary their tasks. I do something special for them all at Halloween, Christmas, and at the end of the year.”

Elizabeth Varley from the Wilmington Montessori School in Wilmington, Delaware suggested that those who are having difficulty finding volunteers might get people hooked by offering incentives such as coupons for the local bookstore or a “library tea” where refreshments and a read-a-loud are provided.

Rena Citrin from Bernard Zell Anshe Emet Day School in Chicago, Illinois says:

Parent volunteers are an important part of my library program. Other parent volunteers and I recruit them each year at our annual open house in September. I have found through the years that our library volunteers have formed their own mini-community. It is cool, for a certain kind of mom (and a few dads and grandparents), to help in the library. Very often, this self-selected group becomes friends.”

Lorraine Smith from Lake Travis ISD in Austin, Texas shared this information:






I work with the PTO to recruit volunteers as they have a big recruitment effort every year. People sign up for all sorts of volunteer jobs. I also do my own recruiting on the side such as talking to parents I meet around the school whom I think would make good volunteers, and ask them to consider doing the job next year. I do a lot of PR work all year long ... that is what takes a lot of time, but it is crucial in maintaining the volunteer base.”

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Another possibility for help in the library might come from an aide already in the school community. One school in San Antonio, Texas has an aide who supervises the cafeteria during breakfast and lunch. In between those two meals, he spends two hours in the library shelving books and assisting students. Many schools have aides assigned to various classrooms who might be available for some help in the library if requested.

How to Use Volunteers

Volunteers can help in many ways, such as:

-  Providing coverage for the library during the lunch periods.
-  Assisting with circulation, including shelving the books.
-  Helping students in the library.
-  “Reading the shelves” to keep them in order.
-  Maintaining the circulation desk and entering titles into the catalog database.

It is important to provide a substitute list for the days when the assigned volunteer cannot serve. Pat Smith keeps a list of people who cannot commit to every week but who can substitute occasionally.

Other volunteers can be employed at their convenience to check in and shelve the periodicals. After a book fair or when a book order has arrived, volunteers are a great help in processing books by producing bookplates on the computer and covering the books with Mylar jackets. One librarian reported that she sends all her new books that need Mylar jackets to a homebound parent volunteer.

After training, volunteers can come in anytime to work on books. Many parents prefer to come just after carpool in the morning, or for a short while before carpool in the afternoon.

Jana Nazari from Wilmington Friends School in Wilmington, Delaware shared the following story about volunteers:

“One of my favorite stories is about the current dad at our lower school who travels constantly on business. Whenever he is in town, he drops in to catch up on his assigned library task, cleaning our computer screens and other AV equipment. He is not at all offended by the lowliness of the task, although we were almost embarrassed to ask him to do it. Because it’s one of the few unscheduled, drop-in things he can do around school, he is happy to do it. And probably no one would have time to do it as often as he does, so we’re happy for any amount of time he can give to it (usually once a month). I have also had volunteers who devoted their lunch hour once a week to us.”

Volunteers are used in many libraries to help scan books during inventory. They can also help with weeding worn-out books from the collection. Weeding the collection is an ongoing project, but inventory is a great opportunity to see each book individually and make decisions as to whether a book needs to be removed, rebound, or replaced. Since many automated systems allow an ongoing inventory, volunteers can use these systems to conduct inventory throughout the school year. This removes the pressure of completing an inventory after books come in at the end of the year, which is a highly stressful time for schools.

Robert L. Shuck, Librarian (Barrigada, Guam) reports the following:

“Where I worked before coming here to Guam, I had a group of great volunteers. They did all sorts of things for the library. Mending, bulletin boards, writing up order slips, story times. I even had one volunteer who decided I needed plants and flowers in the library. So that was her project. I loved them all and appreciated the many things they would do for me. The obligation I placed on them was they had to give a minimum of one hour per week, work on consistent days, and call and let me know if they could not come. Set a work schedule and post it. Everyone needs structure.”

Many parent volunteers love to help in the library during the time their children have classes. It gives them a chance to see what books other children are reading and an opportunity to discover new books to share with their family and friends. Very often, while shelving books, volunteers will discover new titles to check out and share with their families. Parents and volunteers can be given their own library accounts and barcodes to facilitate checking out books that they want to share with their family. These accounts can also give them a longer check-out time than students have. Encouraging volunteers to check out and read books is one more way to promote reading with anyone and everyone we know.

Some library volunteers are capable of serving as substitutes for the librarian. They already know the computer system, the library program, and the children well enough to step in when needed. The library volunteer chair can set up a training date early in the school year for all the volunteers. He can come back to train individually those who must miss that original session. Again, this frees the librarian to work with children and teachers. Sometimes, the library chair can help with special projects in the library. Communicating via e-mail has made the chair’s job a little easier.

Volunteers are a valuable resource during a book fair. Many schools use parents to help students choose books and to work the cash registers during these events. Parents can also help host any author visits during a book fair.

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Judi Reinert from Rockenbaugh Elementary School in Southlake, Texas reports that her school PTO uses “Tickets for Time” to manage volunteers. Volunteers sign up and receive a list of school volunteer programs. Then, parents select an area where they are able to serve and fill out a ticket. The tickets are passed out to the teachers and librarian. Each classroom has a designated person to contact parents when there is a need for help. The library uses these tickets for volunteers for circulation, shelving, helping with author visits, and keeping track of books read for the Texas Bluebonnet Award Election.

How to Keep Volunteers

The most important way to keep volunteers is to thank them. There are several ways to do this. Always say “thank you” verbally in person when they are present. Another way to show appreciation is to donate a book in the volunteer’s honor. When the last book order for the school year arrives, designate one book for each volunteer. Put a bookplate in the new book with the name of each volunteer to honor them for his or her service. Send a letter thanking volunteers for their services and telling them about the books (by title) that have been added to the collection in their honor.

Another way to say “thank you” is with a volunteer appreciation coffee at the home of the librarian, principal, head of school, or other official in the spring each year. Send holiday “thank you” cards in December as well. Have a special assembly in the spring where all school volunteers are recognized by the administrators and presented with flowers to say, “we appreciate you.” All of these events are designed to let the volunteers know how much the success of the library program depends on them and how much they are appreciated for the many hours they have invested in the library.

Continuous communication with the volunteers is extremely important. Expectations for volunteers must be clear and their training must be adequate to assure their success.

Robert Shuck shared the following:

“At the end of the school year, I used the fine money and some of the library budget and had a recognition party. Hours of service, length of service, everyone got something for their volunteer work! I recognized their birthdays with little things from Oriental Trading.”

Rena Citrin from Bernard Zell Anshe Emet Day School in Chicago, Illinois says:

“I run a library volunteer luncheon in May each year where I formally recognize the contribution of each volunteer. I give each person a rose and a small gift. This past year the gift was a mouse pad with a picture of their child in the school and the name of the school on it. The principal and academic administrators attend this luncheon and that lends importance to it. My volunteers are wonderful.”

How to Handle Volunteer Problems

There can be a few problems that come with volunteers. Volunteers occasionally miss their scheduled work times because of a child’s illness or scheduling conflict. Be sure to provide all volunteers with a list of substitutes they can call when they cannot serve their assigned time.

Occasionally, a parent may have an ulterior motive for volunteering. It is extremely important for librarians to monitor carefully what is said to parents about the school, its programs, and faculty. It is important to be supportive of the school and positive in our comments about our fellow workers when in conversation with parents. If parents have concerns, encourage them to make an appointment with the teacher or

administrator to discuss issues directly. One must be careful to avoid “feeding the flames” of discontent or indulging in rumors.

The following quote is from a respected colleague, CaroAnn Germann, Librarian, Kinkaid Lower School, Houston, Texas, and summarizes these thoughts about volunteers:

“I think a volunteer program can work just about anywhere. The keys in my opinion are communication (being sure they know what is expected of them upfront and keep them informed all year) and appreciation. You don’t have to give them expensive gifts, but thank you’s are absolutely necessary. Each library is as different as each school is different. I think one must adapt the volunteer program to the needs of the library and to the makeup of the community. If all you can get is one volunteer for a couple of hours once a week, then prioritize your needs and have that person do what will help you the most while giving them a feeling of accomplishment and satisfaction, but don’t saddle them time after time with the same frustrating, difficult task. Explain clearly what you need, explain again if necessary, change tasks if they are having trouble, make them feel comfortable and needed and very appreciated.”

Recruiting and working with volunteers requires a time investment, but it pays off in building advocates for the library program. Volunteers become true “friends of the library.” We can

never say “thank you” enough for the work done by wonderful volunteers. ■

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