

Working with Volunteers in Your School

More and more schools are using volunteers in the classroom, office, library, lunchroom, playground and on the playing fields. As schools seek to attract and retain more volunteers, it is important to work closely with them so that the needs of the school and the needs of the volunteers can be met. Open and ongoing communication is a key element in ensuring the smooth transition of volunteers into your school.

Those volunteering in the school will need time to become familiar with the school's policies, programs, procedures and protocols. Consider drafting a short handbook based on the elements listed below that can be handed out to any new volunteers.

Please note that these guidelines are applicable once you have appropriately recruited and selected volunteers for your school pursuant to your board's volunteer policy and protocols. If you require background information on the recruitment and selection of volunteers, please refer to the OPC website article on this topic.

Here are some tips that can help you to get volunteers actively involved and ready to go:

1. Refer back to the information that you collected during the selection process to help assign them to the appropriate place within your school, such as:

- Name, address, phone number (day time and evening)
- Subject/program areas in which they feel most comfortable (would they prefer to read to students or help with math?)
- Hours, days, weeks and months they are available to help
- Specific areas of expertise (coaching, music, art)
- Subjects or activities they wish to avoid.

2. Help volunteers to understand that you need them to treat their responsibilities like they would a job by:

- Showing up on time and staying the agreed upon length of time
- Giving the school as much notice as possible if they are unable to come in on a particular day
- Wearing clothing that is appropriate (you may want to outline what you consider appropriate)
- Following classroom, lunchroom, playground and office procedures
- Respecting the privacy of students and staff pursuant to the confidentiality agreement they signed. (Remind teachers about protecting the confidentiality of information in their classrooms and the staff room, as well as conversations they engage in amongst each other in front of volunteers.)

Equally, make clear what tasks should not be undertaken by volunteers such as discipline and academic assessment of students.

3. Consider holding an information night near the beginning of the school year at which time you can outline all your policies/protocols to volunteers.
4. Ensure they have access to pertinent information on school policies in areas such as:
 - Safe schools
 - Confidentiality
 - Fire drills
 - Evacuation and lockdowns
 - Discipline (they may report discipline issues but not discipline students directly)
 - Student and visitor sign in/sign out.
5. Make your volunteers feel more welcome by:
 - Designing special name tags so staff can identify them
 - Assigning someone to introduce them to the staff
 - Providing information about where personal items can be kept, where to access a telephone, the location of the washrooms and the location of the staff lounge.
6. To help ensure success for your students and your volunteers:
 - Maintain and exercise appropriate supervision of volunteers relative to the degree of risk associated with the activity in which they are involved
 - Assign volunteers tasks that take advantage of their skills
 - Make sure the expectations of teachers and staff members are realistic and fair
 - If possible, provide continuity by linking volunteers with one set of students or to one project
 - Shift volunteers to different students or projects if personality differences surface
 - Link a staff person to each volunteer to help monitor their progress and mentor them as necessary.
 - Ensure that volunteers are not put at risk, e.g., working alone with individual students behind closed doors or assigned to volatile individuals.
7. Express your appreciation by:
 - Giving volunteers lapel pins that signify their part on the school team
 - Featuring them and their contributions to the school in your school newsletter
 - If they are a parent, letting their son/daughter know how much you appreciate their parent helping out at the school
 - Taking time during staff meetings to point out their valuable contributions and soliciting ideas on additional ways they can help out in the school
 - Identifying a week during the year to thank them for their work
 - Mentioning the considerable contribution they make in your school when speaking to your school council, trustee, senior administration, media or community members.

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