



Doc H's Blog

Kentucky Education Commissioner
Terry Holliday



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How to Attract and Retain Volunteers for Schools

This week, I'm pleased to present a guest blog from Erin Palmer, a writer and editor for [Bisk Education](#). Her subject is school volunteers, and she offers valuable tips and advice for bringing these resources into your schools – and making them feel welcome and useful.

Now that the Kentucky Administrative Office of the Courts (AOC) is charging school districts a \$10 fee for volunteer [background checks](#), schools could find it more difficult to recruit volunteers – especially if the cost is passed on to parents or to the individual volunteers. Therefore, it is more important than ever to restate the case for school volunteerism and reinvigorate recruitment efforts, despite the new \$10 fee. Here are a few tips on finding, retaining and engaging volunteers for your school.

How to Find School Volunteers

Potential volunteers are everywhere. However, convincing them to commit isn't always easy. Even the most committed parents might hesitate when it comes time to actually fit volunteering into their busy schedules. These ideas will help to convince those who are "on the fence" about volunteering at your school.

- **Explain the Need:** Reach out to groups of parents and explain exactly what is needed and how they can help. Giving specifics (what is needed, why it is important, how they can help) will increase the chances of getting them to commit. Be prepared to offer choices, like selling raffle tickets, coaching a team, helping in the classroom or leading extracurricular activities. Make sure to ask families to commit to a set number of volunteer hours.
- **Ask For Help:** Let people know you need help – it's the easiest way to recruit volunteers. If parents are unaware of the need, they probably won't volunteer. Make introductions to parents, and simply ask if they can lend a hand. Hold a volunteer recruitment event to explain the need, and inform people how they can help. Ask current volunteers to share their positive experiences with interested prospective volunteers. Not all parents are going to volunteer, but if you don't ask, you'll never know.
- **Go Social:** Boost recruitment by communicating with parents and community members through online social media websites. A lot of parents are already using these sites, so it can be an effective way to get their attention. Set up a Facebook page and Twitter account to keep followers informed about volunteer activities and opportunities. Let everyone know how much fun your volunteers have by sharing photos and stories. Showing the volunteers how much their work is helping can improve retention rates and help attract new people to the cause.

- **Promote Career Development:** Let prospective volunteers know that volunteering is great for career development. It provides opportunities to showcase their talents and build relationships with people who could be helpful to their careers. Volunteering can be a great networking opportunity. It also looks great on a resume. In fact, a recent survey by LinkedIn, the world's largest professional social networking site, revealed that 20 percent of hiring managers will make hiring decisions based on volunteer activities.
- **Reach Out to New Families:** New families are often looking for ways to meet people and feel more comfortable in a new community – and many will jump at the chance to volunteer. When a new family comes to town, make them feel welcome and offer them the chance to get involved right away.

Once new volunteers have been recruited, the next job is to keep them motivated so they stay with you as long as possible.

How to Retain Volunteers

Keeping volunteers is much easier than finding and training new ones. Here are some tips to help keep current volunteers onboard, energized and dedicated.

- **Share the Mission:** Help volunteers see the bigger picture. Sharing the school's mission, short- and long-term objectives, and goals of each project helps volunteers know that even their small efforts are worthwhile. When possible, show them exactly where their contributions have helped.
- **Keep Things Interesting:** Introduce volunteers to new tasks and ask them what else they may be interested in. Cross training can help them develop new skills and avoid burnout. Check to see how volunteers are enjoying their work, and be on the lookout for new ways to engage them. A classroom volunteer might be the perfect person to organize the school's spring fair.
- **Don't Waste Their Time:** People are busy, so it is important to respect their time. Keeping volunteers busy and engaged helps them stick around longer. They don't want to stand around waiting to be told what to do. It only takes one bad experience to ruin someone's chances of returning, so don't let it happen. Be organized and ready to put volunteers to work. Keep e-mails to a minimum, meetings short and procedures as simple as possible. Don't make it difficult to volunteer.
- **Plan for the Future:** As volunteers finish a project, ask if they're willing to help in the future, and make a note to follow up. This is much easier if the volunteer database is up to date. If not, perhaps a volunteer can be assigned to work on it. Having a plan makes it much easier to organize who does what.
- **Recognize Their Contributions:** Don't forget to say "thank you." Send cards or personalized e-mails to thank volunteers for their service. Consider a volunteer appreciation event at the end of the year. If they helped with a show or presentation, make sure to include their names on the program and make sure to give them a copy. People who feel appreciated are far more likely to keep helping than those who feel undervalued.

How to Best Use Your School's Volunteers

Recruitment efforts will fall flat if volunteers are not being used to their best potential. Being smart with how volunteers are used helps you get the most out of each person available. Try these tips to enhance volunteer performance:

- **Define Positions:** Organize job assignments according to time and skills required, and be ready to match volunteers accordingly. Clear definitions and reasonable tasks make it easier for people to say, “yes” when asked if they can help.
- **Find a Job That Fits:** Volunteers perform better when assignments match their skills and interests. They don’t want to be bored; nor do they want to feel ill-equipped to handle a job. For example, if you recruit a marketing expert, assign him or her tasks such as managing the school’s Facebook page or promoting fundraisers. Giving this task to someone who is completely new to technology could cause that person to become overwhelmed and quit.
- **Keep Volunteers’ Needs In Mind:** Be flexible when assigning tasks. Some volunteers may be limited to certain hours or only helping from home, while others can’t organize an entire event, but are happy to help with smaller tasks.

The Keys to Successful Volunteer Recruitment

Recruiting, retaining and engaging volunteers can be a daunting task, but when you employ these simple tips, you may find that it’s actually easier than you thought. People are often eager and happy to help out when they are well matched to a task, know the goals they’re contributing to and feel their time is well spent.

Erin Palmer writes about topics like [Master of Public Administration](#) degrees. Nonprofits and other volunteer-based organizations are often run by graduates of an [MPA program](#). She can be reached at erin-palmer@bisk.com.

Terry Holliday, Ph.D.