
VOLUNTEER NETWORK

Orchard Hills School

Milford, Connecticut

Schools implementing Type 3—Volunteering practices face the challenges of recruiting a large diverse group of volunteers and providing them with adequate training to perform volunteer duties. Orchard Hills School has met this challenge by developing the Volunteer Network, a practice designed to increase parent involvement in the schools and improve the quality of volunteer experiences through training.

The school targeted two specific initiatives to network: the Publishing Center and Friday Folders. The Publishing Center formally publishes student written work into book form. Friday Folders improve two-way communication between home and school by sending home correspondence in an organized way. The Publishing Center and Friday Folders require a great deal of volunteer hours and few family members offered to volunteer. Prospective volunteers were unwilling to commit because they did not feel adequately trained or because they only wanted to volunteer to help in their child's classroom. The Volunteer Network addresses both of these issues.

To begin the process, the Volunteer Network Coordinator created Network folders for each classroom teacher that gave detailed descriptions for each volunteer opportunity. In addition, teachers had the opportunity to customize their requests to also include Room Parents, Computer Volunteers, Reading Helpers, Media Volunteers, and other positions. At Open House, classroom teachers used the folders to recruit volunteers for the Publishing Center and Friday Folders, along with their additional requests.

The Volunteer Network Coordinator collected the folders and provided a list of volunteers to the Publishing Center and Friday Folder committees. The Friday Folders chairperson organized an evening training session in September.

The Publishing Center training was more involved. Training was held in the evening and during school hours to accommodate all schedules. Some volunteers learned how to interview children during school hours after a written work was ready for publication. Volunteers received training for other Publishing Center tasks such as typing the written work into a template and binding the finished book. Much of this work could be done at home or in the school after school hours.

In addition to Publishing Center and Friday Folders training, the school also offered training in other areas. Early in September, the principal invited new volunteers to an orientation to share information about confidentiality issues and safety procedures. Volunteers learned where the bathrooms were and where supplies were located. The school also provided training to use the digital camera and Claris Works. The school office kept a list of room parents and trained volunteers for easy reference.

The Volunteer Network ran smoothly because of a few thoughtful actions. The principal explained the network to the faculty so that teachers understood their role in the recruiting of volunteers and the process by which each committee would help them. In addition, each separate committee planned its own training sessions during the day and evening in order to be responsive to volunteers' needs. Volunteers could gather information about the volunteer activities by reading pamphlets and detailed written explanations and by asking committee chairpersons.

The Volunteer Network has reaped positive results. The school has recruited many more volunteers by highlighting the different types of volunteer opportunities available. The number of Publishing Center volunteers has grown from 36 to 60 due to the Volunteer Network. Of the 60, 36 volunteers agreed to be an interviewer for the Publishing Center and come into their child's classroom during school hours. Even more exciting, twenty volunteers were completely new to the Publishing Center this year. One of these new recruits will co-chair the committee next year. The number of volunteers for the Friday Folders went from one to over seven parents.

Parents volunteered because the tasks were manageable and meaningful to their child's school experience. Parents who worked during the day were able to volunteer in the evening and at home. Teachers were pleased with the quality of the volunteers. The chairpersons of the two committees were pleased to have extra support for their programs.

Costs for the Volunteer Network were minimal. The cost of network folders and sheet protectors was only \$7.00. The volunteers of each committee planned and conducted their own training. The cost of the Friday Folders had already been incurred in a previous year. Staff volunteered to conduct the training on Claris Works and the digital camera.

In order to begin the Volunteer Network, this Action Team for Partnerships suggests that a school start out small and target one or two school-wide initiatives. There is a large investment of time at the beginning of the school year because of training, but it pays off over time.

Kathleen Murphy, Principal and Karen Blito, Volunteer Network Coordinator

(203) 783-3566