

# RECRUITING LITERACY VOLUNTEERS

BY BRIAN JENSEN

As showcased in this and previous issues of 'In Schools Today', there is a variety of literacy programs currently being utilised in schools. However, many share a common component; they rely on the involvement of volunteers to assist in the classroom.

There is considerable evidence that volunteers, whether parents or community members, have a very positive effect on children's literacy development.

The most important benefit is the level of individual attention students receive. Dr Linda Vining, in her book 'Working with Volunteers in Schools', notes one study found that volunteers working in the classroom provided teachers with an additional 15 hours of interaction with each student per year.

This level of individual attention, combined with the benefits of interaction with a variety of adults and observing inter-adult communication, provides a very strong case for the use of literacy volunteers in the classroom.

Volunteers are also a valuable asset to schools in financial terms. As an example Dr Vining points out that 30 volunteers, working two hours per week, adds up to the equivalent of two full time staff.

Literacy volunteers are often motivated by a strong desire to help children, including their own, as well as to gain an understanding of the literacy process. Because of this motivation, literacy volunteers tend to be very committed and reliable, which in turn makes them easy for schools to manage.

One literacy volunteer I spoke with put it this way, "I'm not a carter person, I'm not a uniform shop person, I much prefer to give my time to actually helping the children. I've done it religiously over the last two years..I've been there every week come hell or high water!"

Both the Tasmanian and Victorian Departments of Education value parent participation very highly and actively encourage schools to use volunteers.

However, while schools appreciate the importance of literacy volunteers, most find it difficult to attract as many as they would like. Following are some ideas to assist in the recruitment of volunteers.

## Who to Attract

### The School Community

**Parents and caregivers** are the obvious target and often make up the greater proportion of classroom helpers. As well as recruiting new parents, invite parents of school leavers to continue as volunteers; they do not have to retire purely because they no longer have children at the school.



### Grandparents and other relatives

of the children are often an eager, but frequently overlooked, source of volunteers. A grandmother I talked to said, "I was surprised when they (the school) wanted grandmas to help, but the children don't seem to think you're too old." She also pointed out that grandparents can help bridge the gap left by mothers unable to volunteer due to work commitments.

**Retired neighbours**, both of the children and of the school itself.

**School staff.** Part-time teacher assistants may be willing to donate an hour or two. Non-teaching staff may also be prepared to help in the classroom. At one Tasmanian school both the groundsman and school attendant have rearranged their hours to enable them to become volunteer literacy tutors.

**Relatives, friends and neighbours of staff.** Staff often know people that would like to work with children or who relate well with children.

**Retired staff.** While some teachers look forward to a break from children, others miss the interaction with them. Becoming a literacy volunteer is a way of remaining in contact with children. One volunteer told me, "One of the reasons I love doing it is that I worked with children for 20 odd years prior to retiring. When I retired I missed, naturally, working with the children."

As well as retired teachers from your school, try contacting a retired teachers group in your area.

**Peers.** This works particularly well at district high schools, but can also work in primary schools, with Year 5 & 6 students helping younger children. High school students planning to enter the teaching profession can do work experience as literacy volunteers at a local primary school.

**High school leavers.** Primary schools could consider contacting high school leavers, particularly those who have no prospective job or course. They may find being a literacy volunteer helps maintain their self esteem while they are unemployed.

**Former students** who still live in the area.

### The Broader Community

Try sourcing the broader community for prospective volunteers. While this takes a little more effort, it can be

very productive. Following are some ideas.

**Service clubs** in your area, such as Rotary and Lions clubs.

**Senior citizens** organizations may have members willing to volunteer.

**Retirement village residents** may be prepared to help at a nearby school.

**Local churches** can put you in touch with volunteer groups within the congregation, such as women's groups or young people doing community service.

**Local business.** With many small businesses being run from home, working hours are more flexible. Some businesses may prefer to support the local school by volunteering rather than make monetary donations.

**Local councils** run community projects that could put you in contact with prospective volunteers.



**Volunteer centres.** It is usually necessary for a school to register with a centre before prospective volunteers can be directed to the school.

**Special volunteer programs**, specific to particular areas. Examples are the Program to Aid Literacy (PAL) run by St John Ambulance (NSW) and Grandfriends, a group from the Retired and Senior Volunteer Program (RSVP), also in NSW. While these particular programs are not currently available in





**Personal contact** can be made via letter or phone to individuals who may miss other forms of recruitment.

**Posters** outlining the literacy program and requesting volunteers, can be placed on noticeboards in a variety of locations, such as local libraries, community centres, shopping centres, medical centres, retirement villages, churches etc.

#### Community newsletters

Victoria or Tasmania, there may be something similar in your local community.

### How to Attract

Once you have identified who to target,

you need to decide how to make contact with them.

**Word of mouth** is extremely effective, and is certainly the cheapest method. Encourage everyone associated with the school, such as staff and parents, to talk to friends, relatives, neighbours, and associates about the possibility of volunteering.

**School newsletters** should be used to request the assistance of parents and caregivers. Request parents ask grandparents, other relatives, neighbours, and friends if they would like to volunteer also.



- **Translations** if there is a significant non-English speaking population in the local community. Being a literacy volunteer can help those for whom English is a second language.

Ensure that the school is prepared to handle inquiries from prospective volunteers. Allocate one person to answer phone queries and ensure they have at their fingertips a full job description, a volunteer timetable and a sheet for recording names and phone numbers for follow up.

#### BENEFITS TO VOLUNTEERS

- Energy exuded by children makes people feel good.
- Feelings of appreciation and value.
- Feelings of worth and usefulness.
- Provides a break to monotonous or isolated routines.
- Opportunity to make new friends.
- Feelings of pride as children develop.
- Knowledge of literacy process and education system.
- Able to assist others with literacy at home or in the community.
- Provides a link to prior working life.
- Receive training and/or work experience.
- May spark an interest for further work or study.
- Can add details to CV.

#### Additional benefits for parents and caregivers

- Feel good because child excited they are helping.
- Can see how own child is coping at school.
- Able to assist own children at home without giving conflicting messages.
- Get to know child's teacher so easier to approach them.
- Observe how teachers handle children's behaviour.
- Opportunity to meet child's friends and see how they interact with them.



### Overcoming Obstacles

Some teachers feel uncomfortable with volunteers in 'their classroom' and this should be addressed to ensure maximum benefit is achieved from volunteers' time.

Sometimes people do not volunteer because they feel they are not trained or qualified. Consider offering an introductory orientation or training session to overcome the problem. This is also a good opportunity to cover issues such as reliability, confidentiality, personal contact with students, discipline and accidents.

Lack of childcare facilities means many parents with small children are unable to volunteer. There are various options for overcoming this problem.

Consider making a room available where young children may be looked after. Parents of those children can take it in turns to care for them. Another option is for small groups of parents (2 or 3 depending on their number of children) to job share; one parent helps at the school while the other looks after the children in

their own home, alternating roles each week.

Some teachers don't mind having young children in the classroom. Babies will usually sleep in their prams and toddlers are often happy to sit in a corner and play with toys. Obviously if they become disruptive, arrangements may need to be reviewed.

Transport can be a problem for older volunteers. Consider how you might be able to assist. If you have several people coming from the one retirement village, check to see if the retirement home has its own bus. If you have a few people from the same senior citizens association, there may be a community bus that can transport them from a central location. Perhaps even a member of staff could offer transport.

### Assimilation

Make volunteers feel comfortable on their first visit. Ensure they know where to go and that someone is there to meet them. Introduce them to the relevant people, and show them where the amenities are.

Take into account volunteers' skills and preferences when matching them to activities in the classroom.

Ensure that systems are in place to support the volunteers. There should be a volunteer coordinator they can turn to if necessary and a procedure for handling complaints. You may wish to include an evaluation system.

Most importantly, constantly show appreciation for the time and effort given by volunteers and ensure they feel valued thus keeping them motivated.

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#### Contacts:

**Dr Linda Vining's book - Working with Volunteers in Schools -**

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**Lions Clubs -**  
See Yellow Pages

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