

School volunteers come in many forms. Parents and family members regularly help in the classroom; some act as chaperones for activities off school grounds – for a day or overnight. Community members donate their time to help coach a team or lead an after-school program, and staff members may agree to help with the Parent-Teacher Association (PTA) or another organization outside their regular job duties. Volunteers are a wonderful resource and an asset to schools. Still, districts should carefully craft their volunteer programs to address the additional risks their work presents.

School districts are responsible for the care, custody, and control of students in both the eyes of parents and the courts. Failure to keep a student safe can result in liability and possible charges of negligence. Since there is an array of volunteers, it is essential for districts to implement structured programs to help identify, manage, and oversee this great resource. Properly designed volunteer programs benefit staff, students, and volunteers.

PROCEDURES FOR USE OF VOLUNTEERS

Communicating Expectations

Volunteers, like paid employees, must clearly understand their duties and function. Creating accurate volunteer position descriptions and requiring volunteer review of district policies and procedures aid in creating a safe and enjoyable experience. All parties benefit when expectations are clearly defined. Be clear and put in writing how a volunteer should deal with student discipline issues, physical altercations between students, proper versus improper touching, and confidentiality issues. Many districts feel they must accept all offers to volunteer. Clear guidelines make it easier for staff to evaluate if a volunteer is successful, if they need to be utilized in other avenues, or if their services should be terminated.

Many district parents seek out volunteering opportunities in their own child's class. It is important for the district to communicate expectations that volunteers are supporting the district's volunteer needs and not the needs of their child. Any individual given volunteer privileges by the school district is expected to perform their volunteer responsibilities as defined by their district policy and by their supervising staff member. It is important to remind supervising staff and volunteers that whether it is a trip to the zoo or a visit to the museum, they are acting as official district volunteers, not only as parents.

Ensure Proper Vetting

The district must communicate the requirements for background checks and fingerprinting to potential volunteers as a way to ensure the safety and integrity of students and programs. Parents and community members will be less likely to see these as burdens if their importance in protecting children is explained. Direct all staff to connect potential volunteers to the appropriate individual who can answer their questions and provide the necessary paperwork. Keep the paperwork simple and streamlined with easy-to-read instructions. Explain to volunteers their limitations when working with students until their proper clearances are obtained. Develop a system such as colored badges to distinguish between those who have and have not received clearance.

Screening Volunteers

Since there are no specific references to volunteer screening in the statutes, Washington State's employee screening statutes are also applicable to volunteers:

- [RCW 9.96A.020](#) prohibits school employment for persons convicted of a felony against a child.
- [RCW 43.43.830](#) requires background checks of employees who work with children.
- [RCW 28A.400.303](#) requires employees with regularly unsupervised access to students to go through the Washington State Patrol criminal identification system, including a fingerprint check.

Typical positions with unsupervised contact with students include coaches, drivers, mentors, teacher's aides, and tutors. Districts may use the same background check process for volunteers or contractors with unsupervised access under circumstances where access will or may involve:

- i) Groups of five or fewer children under twelve years of age
- ii) Groups of three or fewer children between twelve and eighteen years of age; or
- iii) Persons with developmental disabilities

Volunteer Orientation and Training

Districts need to conduct orientation for volunteers before an assignment. Topics discussed should include:

- The role of volunteers in district activities
- Volunteers' duties and limitations: volunteers should work under the direction of the supervising school/district staff member
- Expected behavior of volunteers, such as no smoking, drinking, drug use, or possession of weapons during a district event, and other prohibited acts
- Rules against sexual harassment; volunteers should not place themselves in situations where they are alone with a student
- Mandatory reporting
- Maintaining professional boundaries
- Electronic communication policy
- Expected behavior for students and enforcement of school rules
- Specific duties to be performed and job skills needed for those duties
- Risks involved in activities and assigned duties
- General safety and liability issues, including emergency procedures
- Ways to minimize risk or injury
- Dress code and supplies to bring
- Record-keeping requirements
- Confidentiality and ethics issues
- Other rules, such as not bringing other family members or friends along without district approval.

Have volunteers acknowledge the orientation and training in writing and maintain this signed and dated acknowledgment in the volunteer's file.

SUPERVISING STUDENTS ON FIELD TRIPS

Volunteer chaperones should receive a trip-specific orientation, especially for extended field trips that involve overnight stays or traveling to a foreign country. The building principal determines the appropriate number of chaperones and is subject to review by the superintendent or designee. The number of adult supervisors depends on the age and gender of the students, the duration of the trip, the nature of the activities, and special safety or health considerations. On overnight trips, gender-specific chaperones are needed. Chaperones and staff should be trained to make bed checks and enforce curfews.

The district should train chaperones to supervise students at all times. On trips, chaperones may encounter unique supervision situations and should be prepared to respond to emerging challenges and communicate them with supervising staff. They should not let students explore independently and take side trips without adult supervision. Remember, "If you can't see them, you are not supervising them."

SUPERVISION, MONITORING, AND EVALUATION OF VOLUNTEERS

Have a process in place to check in and check out volunteers. We strongly recommend that volunteers wear some form of easily read identification, such as a name tag, designating them as volunteers and as having checked in. Collect name tags when the volunteer checks out. Staff should never ask a volunteer to work one-on-one with a student behind closed doors or place them in any situation that could be considered risky and unprofessional.

Assign a qualified staff member to supervise each volunteer and set up a system of responding to volunteer problems (both reported by them and about them). Make unannounced visits to monitor and assist volunteers. Regular evaluation of volunteers must be documented and retained. Solicit performance feedback from observers and program participants and include these during the evaluation process. Volunteer performance can be measured by using duty descriptions as a guide. Giving regular feedback to volunteers on their work is invaluable. This process allows for volunteer feedback about their experience within the school environment, creates effective communication channels, and encourages the retention of long-term volunteers. Reward quality volunteers who create a positive impact and end the service of those not meeting standards.

Liability Coverage

WSRMP provides liability coverage for district employees while working within the course and scope of their employment, which is extended to school district volunteers while performing duties at the direction or request of the district. This coverage only applies to district-sponsored activities; therefore, trips sponsored by the PTA or booster clubs are not covered. This coverage also does not provide medical benefits to volunteers in the event of accidental injury. The district can be held liable for the actions of volunteers through the legal doctrine of *Respondeat Superior*. Therefore, it is responsible for selecting, training, and supervising them.

Volunteer Informed Consent Form

A district may limit the amount of its exposure to claims for injury to volunteers by obtaining informed consent forms from adult volunteers. This form should include the inherent risks of the activities and language that holds the district harmless in case of bodily injury and property damage losses. Urge volunteers to maintain their own health or accident insurance, or the district may provide volunteer workers' compensation coverage. See WSRMP's sample "Volunteer Hold Harmless Agreement" on the [WSRMP member website](#).

Transportation of Students by Volunteers

WSRMP considers transporting students in school buses the safest mode of transportation. We realize this is not always possible. If the district allows volunteers to transport students, it is important to have a documented process for vetting and approving the drivers. WSRMP has created a sample "Volunteer Driver Checklist" to help ensure that guidelines are followed. Field trip permission slips must indicate if volunteers are driving students.

Also, Washington State and federal laws require children to be secured in appropriate booster seats until a certain age and weight and prohibit using vans rated with a seating capacity for more than ten persons unless the van meets all school bus regulations. These laws also apply to leased vans and those not owned by the school district. (See [WAC 392-143-010](#) definition of a school bus.)

Many wonderful learning opportunities are opened because of parent volunteers, community helpers, and off-site chaperones. With proper pre-planning, training, and guidance, these can be safe learning experiences for students, staff, and volunteers alike.

For questions about recommendations or issues addressed in this article, please contact our Risk Services Department at 206.394.9737 or riskservices@wsrmp.com.