The Art of Managing Volunteers in the School Library

by GAYLE BOGEL

There is intrinsic value in a school library. It offers even the youngest citizens the opportunity to practice democracy in the form of community participation. Involving volunteers in the day-to-day functions of the library establishes an ongoing dialog between library and community (Driggers and Dumas 2002, 168). School librarians share the mission of the library, its value as shared educational space, to the widest possible audience by reaching into the community to build social capital (Bourke 2009, 181). Valuing what is created by their own efforts is a powerful connection for stakeholders, and volunteers are one way of making much of the “invisible” work of the library visible.

Potential Volunteers

The singular nature of a school librarian’s job demands expertise in meeting challenges and recognizing opportunities. But libraries, by definition, are community endeavors. Framing library functions as shared responsibilities benefits not only the solitary school librarian, but all who are drawn to the idea of shared learning. Who can help the school librarian reap the benefits and social capital of volunteer activities in the school library?

Students and parents are the most obvious choices, but other constituents and stakeholders—the ones beyond the school walls in the larger community—are also worth considering. It is often easiest to round up students to help shelve or ask a few parents to help with book checkout. But if the goal is to raise visibility and establish stakeholder buy-in to the importance of the library, reaching out to local businesses, political officials, and other community volunteer groups is essential.

Students

Students of all ages have something to offer a library program. Many are motivated by requirements of community service hours, a few are inherently altruistic, and some are book or tech lovers. And there are always those who need a “home” and find comfort and a sense of belonging in the library.

Libraries offer experiences in civic responsibility, character education, and personal participation in a democratic institution of shared community space. Caring for public space is a learned responsibility, and the school library has the potential to provide early experiences in civic duties. Elementary students can help organize shelves of print, and practice curriculum-related skills such as assigning alphabetical order or ordering decimal numbers. Digital resources and equipment need maintenance. Older students can demonstrate increasing responsibility in sharing essential tasks such as circulation checkout, preparing materials for younger students, organizing displays, or locating curriculum materials chosen by the librarian. A recent study has shown that along with benefitting the library, the volunteer activities of young adults in libraries can be a powerful way to connect with their communities (Bernier 2009, 138).

“Citizen Service is the very American idea that we meet our challenges not as isolated individuals but as members of a true community, with all of us working together. Our mission is nothing less than to spark a renewed sense of obligation, a new sense of duty, a new season of service.”

—Bill Clinton
Parents are often the most available adult volunteers. Many schools traditionally organize parent volunteers through parent organizations or groups to manage book fairs, and actively channel willing members to the library for help with basic activities of circulation and shelving. For those with busy schedules, libraries offer an opportunity to contribute to the school in a well-defined regular schedule that fits with their other commitments. For others, the value of the library is a clear priority and volunteering is an opportunity to contribute to an area of the school that fits with their personal values. Parents often realize for the first time that managing a library is more than stamping due dates on books (Barack 2005, 17).

Teachers and Staff

The library can benefit from being considered the community space for the entire school. The idea of shared ownership is sometimes lost if the library is relegated to being just another classroom and the librarian to being viewed as strictly a teacher.

Librarians can cultivate use of the library for schoolwide activities as a first step to being more visible. Sharing precious time and space with volunteer activities that are NOT directly part of the library can open the door to awareness of the library and can benefit even the busiest teachers. Collaboration begins with familiarity—of resources, of opportunities, of space—and bringing teachers and staff into the library can translate to communication for further collaboration.

The Larger Community

This is where reaching out in a personal way works. This can be accomplished by a well-planned letter, a call to an official's office, or networking through an advisory board. Librarians have the opportunity to reach out to those community stakeholders who may be the most outspoken about budgets and support for schools and libraries. School board members, local government officials, and business owners all have a commitment to the community and can actively promote citizen involvement. Offering participation in the library program, from inviting the mayor to read aloud on Dr. Seuss's birthday to asking a business to sponsor the printing of summer reading brochures is a visible way to showcase support. Most are pleased to take on opportunities and commitments that raise their visibility.

Managing the Process: Organize, Recruit, Train, Sustain, and Celebrate

Organize

School librarians focus on effective organization. Attention to detail, combined with flexibility and creativity in meeting student and teacher needs, is crucial to successfully managing a library. But, it is important to note that attention to detail does not mean having to micromanage. It is still possible to capitalize on the fresh views, knowledge, and enthusiasm of volunteers. School librarians can start with a clearly defined mission statement, and determine priorities for both long- and short-range goals. The overall plan does not need to be perfect or even finished, but areas for delegation do need to be considered. What specific tasks can potential volunteers accomplish? What will they need in materials, directions, training time?

Recruit

Once there is a plan (whether short- or long-range) and some areas have been defined that can be delegated to volunteers, what are effective recruitment strategies? How can help be enlisted to reach those goals? Students can be contacted through posting notices or working with teachers or counselors for community service projects. Parents can be reached
by contacting parent organizations, including a short notice in the school newsletter, or posting to the library website. A short presentation can be made at the first parent meeting or a school librarian can use open house in September to stand in the door of the library to greet parents and introduce him or herself as parents walk by, giving them information about volunteering.

◆ Contacting businesses and local officials should be handled directly. A personal letter to the mayor to participate in a read aloud or to a business that may be willing to support summer reading is the best approach.

◆ TRAIN

Time needs to be set aside for training. Volunteers will take their cue as to their importance from the manner in which they are treated. It may be possible to schedule a short meeting for all parents who have agreed to help with shelving or with students who are working on community service, but most often the volunteers are giving up snippets of their valuable time, and the librarian will need to meet briefly with them as they come in to work.

A new volunteer will need an introduction to the library and understanding of the responsibilities of volunteers for both the library and the school. Basic library positions on privacy and intellectual freedom will be helpful for volunteers to understand, particularly those who may help with circulation duties.

Training is the groundwork for cultivating rewards from volunteering. Taking the time to carefully train is clear communication to volunteers of the quality of the program, and they will respond to the tone that has been set.

◆ SUSTAIN

Relationships develop as a natural result of the volunteering process. The social capital for the school librarian can be invaluable in maintaining support for the library program (De Stricker 2009, 13). Most volunteers enjoy meeting and getting to know others in the day-to-day work. They need to feel a connection to the organization and that they belong (Bourke 2009, 182).

Developing volunteers requires time and attention. Sometimes that means something as simple as getting to know the volunteers, greeting them by name, and chatting briefly as they arrive or leave—without disrupting the flow of daily work. Recognizing volunteers in the school newsletter or offering a coffee or lunch at the end of each year is common practice. Librarians should never underestimate the value of recognition on a daily basis. Providing a badge for parents to wear while working gives them a sense of belonging and visibility with students. Many younger students may also enjoy a badge as a mark of “special status” for their volunteer activities, although that will vary as they grow older. Putting a small sign to acknowledge choices for a book display (Quick picks from Mrs. Smith), or asking a volunteer to preview some new books and give his/her opinion is an easy and respectful gesture.

◆ CELEBRATE

Celebrate—both for volunteers and the librarian! Managing a volunteer force for the library is a tribute to management skills and commitment to the school community.

Librarians can also plan visible acknowledgment—year-end notices in the school newsletter, a volunteer profile each month on the school website, a poster with a group shot of the volunteers. Much like scheduling training sessions, it may not be possible to gather everyone for a special on-site celebration, but a morning coffee invitation may be appreciated even if all are not able to attend. For those outside the school walls, a letter to the editor of the local newspaper is a direct way to thank and highlight their efforts.

CONCLUSION

Inviting volunteers to give their best, to invest time and talent in the library program, to actively participate in solving problems of daily maintenance—from circulation and shelving to the bigger issues of fundraising and budget—builds community and provides intrinsic satisfaction for their volunteer efforts. Being a visible and appreciated part of a dynamic, well-managed library program that plays a role as a valuable partner in the goals of both the school and larger community… what could bring more satisfaction than that?

REFERENCES:


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