



## ***TOWARD EXPANDING VOLUNTEERISM IN PREK-12 CLASSROOMS***

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### ***Introduction***

The PreK-12 educational industry is changing rapidly. Charter schools. Private-for-profit schools. Greater use of home schooling. Vouchers. Computer based learning systems catering to the individual learning styles of students. Budget shortfalls for public schools. Changing governance structures and the evolving roles of School Boards.

All these are challenges to the public school, PreK-12 environment. And there are many more challenges to come including the role of internet based cameras recording every action and every word in every classroom (discussed in a separate paper by this author) and the possibility a completely redefining who is the “customer” for PreK-12 education in the United States (also discussed in a separate paper by this author).

### ***The Role Of Volunteerism***

Volunteers currently play many roles in the public school PreK-12 environment. They help out in the office, assist with extracurricular activities, raise money and address key issues through the PTA or PTSA and serve on governing and quasi-governing boards at the community level throughout the United States. This author is not aware of any statistics collected on the level of volunteerism each year in the PreK-12 public school environment.

Often high school students volunteer to mentor elementary school students in programs such as “Elementary Baseball” in Washington, D.C. College students mentor PreK-12 students through the National Society for Collegiate Scholars throughout the United States. There are many other valuable mentoring after school and weekend mentoring programs and this author has been a mentor for a District of Columbia elementary school student in the northeast section of the city.

Even though there are literally thousands of volunteer efforts in and around the PreK-12 public school environment, there has never been a successful movement to place truly large numbers of volunteers in the classroom. There are many reasons why such a large scale volunteer program has never taken hold, but there are now as many reasons why such a large scale volunteer program may become an integral part of the PreK-12 environment within the next decade.

One can easily find a dozen reasons why teachers, students and PreK-12 administrators would not want two, or even one, adult volunteer in every classroom every day in the United States. These reasons include:

- Students do not want to be observed
- Teachers do not want to be observed
- Schools do not want to be liable for the actions of volunteers
- Schools do not have the resources to screen the volunteers
- Schools do not have the resources to train the volunteers
- Schools do not have the capability to or interest in recruiting the volunteers
- Teachers' learning plans presently do not have the ability to utilize one or two "full time" volunteers
- Volunteers may raise safety concerns among teachers and PreK-12 administrators
- Volunteers, in the teachers and PreK-12 administrators may not be able to add much value to the teaching and learning experience of the students
- Schools are not capable of managing large numbers of volunteers or providing for them at the schools
- There may not be enough volunteers to volunteer in every classroom.

There may be another dozen reasons why there has never been a large scale program to add volunteers to the classroom in PreK-12 public education. While it is beyond the scope of this article to address each of the reasons listed above, this article will show how social forces are converging that suggest that such a large scale volunteer program might be developed on a pilot basis in innovative school districts and may prove to be incredibly beneficial to the PreK-12 public education system.

### *The Social Forces*

The environment of PreK-12 education is changing rapidly. The public education system is being challenged today as it has not been challenged since the civil rights days. Today the challenges come from many fronts as identified at the beginning of this article. ***How will public education improve and improve dramatically?*** That is the key question that all teachers, all PreK-12 administrators and all educational associations must grapple with and grapple with quickly. Without improvement, there could be a

steady erosion of public support, a steady erosion or brain drain in the educational system and there will be a serious loss of resources (money, students, teachers, buildings, curricula, etc.) to the upstart competitors of PreK-12 public schools. As we enter the "Age of Accountability" and the educational market is opened up to competition by home schooling, private for profit schools, charter schools, vouchers and other sources of competition, public PreK-12 education is facing a key question: ***"How does public education secure additional valuable resources when government funds are becoming more scarce for PreK-12 public education?"***

The resource inputs in a school environment are very easy to identify:

- Teachers (human capital)
- Administrators (organizational capital)
- Buildings (physical capital)
- Students (customer capital)
- Curricula/Books/Libraries (intellectual capital)
- Reputation (public relations capital)
- Educational testing and standards (accountability capital)
- Security officers (safety capital)
- School Boards (governance capital)
- Extracurricular activities and programs (programmatic capital)
- Budgets (financial capital)

In every category of capital or set of resource inputs, we see real limits. How can schools find something today that impacts positively on each and every resource input without costing them significant amounts of money? It is impractical to think that buildings will be donated, that school districts will be able to find ways like the private sector has done over the past three decades to eliminate levels of management and not hurt productivity. Curricula will not be donated to schools. Students and their parents will fight being charged significant sums for students to participate in extracurricular activities. Governments will not add to school budgets significantly and will not in the future increase spending per student or project long term budgets consistent with long term population predictions. The political process, which has a fairly short term time horizon, can not commit five and ten years out to guarantee schools sufficient funding in the future.

### ***Volunteers In The Classroom***

The first proposition I make is one that I admit has not been proven. That proposition is that enough people in the United States could be recruited to volunteer in every classroom every day. We have 2,000,000 PreK-12 public school classrooms and assuming that each volunteer volunteers one day per week for ½ a day, we will need 10,000 volunteers. In addition, we would need another 500,000 volunteers to volunteer for extra curricular activities and after school mentoring.

Today, we may have a greater opportunity to promote volunteerism in schools. America's Promise provides volunteers as do corporations like Starbucks giving workers time off from their jobs to volunteer. More and more people are reaching retirement years when they may have more time to volunteer. Thus, the potential exists for more adults to volunteer in classrooms as a "teacher's assistant" or in some other capacity that would increase the human capital and intellectual capital available to the PreK-12 public schools without significant cost.

I believe the screening, training, recruitment issues can be successfully resolved with pilot programs. The fact that some teachers and some students may hold the point of view that they would not like a volunteer in their classroom may be a thought that will fade as volunteers find ways to become useful in making significant contributions to the PreK-12 educational system of this country.

It is also possible that by enrolling so many volunteers into the PreK-12 public school environment that we will become a 'teaching nation' and the volunteers will become important stakeholders, political allies and supporters of the public education system. It is also clear that a well run volunteer program like the one suggested here could result in higher educational achievement by students, better discipline in the classrooms, the development of long standing mentoring relationships between volunteers and students and could also result in giving students important role models as these adults exhibit the best in themselves and in America as they volunteer. This program could improve the lives of many Americans who would welcome the right volunteer opportunity, one where their desire and capabilities to contribute to others is allowed to flourish in the place where the next generation of Americans are getting their start in life.

### ***Conclusion***

The purpose of this article is to start a conversation, a debate, that intersects the fields of volunteerism and the need to improve our public schools. The goal is to direct high quality resources into our public schools without breaking the budgets of local, state and federal governments. I hope that a pilot project could start with foundation support to test this idea in several school districts. Full national implementation of this idea could take place within the next decade. I believe that teachers and students have little to fear if this becomes a national program, a National Educational Corps, if you will. Issues

like how to insure or bond the volunteers so that schools will not be liable for their actions can be resolved in the financial markets and through leadership of associations with skill and knowledge in the insurance arena.

With the risks of the program being real, but low, and the benefits of the program being potentially enormous, this programmatic idea should at least be given a full and fair debate at the national, state and local program level. If we do it, I would want to call it either the “National Educational Corps” or the “Wofford” program, to acknowledge the great work in the field of volunteerism that Harris Wofford has brought to this country. If I had never met Harris Wofford and had never had the privilege of working with him in the 1970’s on the idea of National Youth Service, I do not know if I would have become such a supporter of this idea.

Finally, the benefits of this program can be easily measured through students’ scores, reduction in student dropout rates, the public’s perception of how well schools are doing, the volunteers’ rating of the program, and many other easily documented measures in use in the educational world. This is a program whose time has come, but will take a long time to actually become reality.